



## Article

# Mobile Media as an “Essential” Tool for Collective Action: Explaining Intentions for Disruptive Political Behavior in U.S. Politics

Ian Hawkins <sup>1,\*</sup>, Scott W. Campbell <sup>2</sup> and Andrew Gelderman <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Communication Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL 35294, USA<sup>2</sup> Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA\* Correspondence: [ihawkins@uab.edu](mailto:ihawkins@uab.edu)

**Abstract:** Mobile media are fundamental to social life in a growing number of ways. Beyond the mundane, the technology has come to play a meaningful role in protests and emergent demonstrations worldwide, including recent cases of political violence among far-right groups in the U.S. Drawing from the folk theory tradition, this study samples Alt-Right supporters to investigate how perceived essence of mobile media, particularly as a tool for collective action, is associated with willingness to engage in racially motivated and extreme political action in offline and online contexts. Findings reveal that perceptions of the mobile phone as a tool for collective action are associated with greater intentions to participate in online and offline activity explicitly in support of White people. Additionally, we find cases where links between essence and intentions are strengthened among those reporting higher levels of micro-coordination, or use of mobile media for coordinating with others in daily life. The findings indicate how everyday life perceptions and practices function and interact in ways that help explain willingness to join racially motivated calls to action among this group. The discussion offers implications for studying mobile media and collective action more broadly, especially in the context of under-researched political groups.



**Citation:** Hawkins, Ian, Scott W. Campbell, and Andrew Gelderman. 2023. Mobile Media as an “Essential” Tool for Collective Action: Explaining Intentions for Disruptive Political Behavior in U.S. Politics. *Journalism and Media* 4: 258–271. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4010018>

Academic Editors: Jacob Nelson, Jakob Ohme and Kathleen Searles

Received: 30 November 2022

Revised: 8 January 2023

Accepted: 27 January 2023

Published: 5 February 2023



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**Keywords:** mobile communication; mobile media; mobile phone; collective action; political participation; far-right; survey; micro-coordination

## 1. Mobile Media as an “Essential” Tool for Collective Action: Explaining Intentions for Disruptive Political Behavior in U.S. Politics

Mobile media and communication have become essential for engagement in contemporary social life, from the personal to the professional to the political (Ling 2012). Within the political realm, one area that garners attention from scholars and the news media is the important role technology has come to play in collective political action. Studies and stories from around the world illustrate how mobile media empower individuals to coordinate emergent protests, communicate about them widely, and tap into reciprocity among social ties for recruitment of protesters (e.g., Liu 2016; Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013; Rheingold 2002). However, when it comes to the technology’s role in supporting or suppressing collective action based on ethnic conflict, results are mixed and can be dependent upon the unit of analysis (Bailard 2015).

In the United States, social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) are widely recognized for their use of mobile/social media to organize protests and bring people together around a common message in the aftermath of anti-black racist events (Mundt et al. 2018; Ray et al. 2017). Usage of the technology can just as easily support political violence, such as the attack at the U.S. Capitol building in 2021 (Barrett et al. 2021). In the lead-up to the event, social media was used to spread far-right misinformation about the election (Lee et al. 2022), and on the day of organizers relied heavily on mobile messaging

to communicate with each other, share information, and discuss routes to the Capitol (Frenkel 2021). Here, as with other cases, mobile media stand out as a prominent tool for how people engage in collective action. Beyond messaging, accessing social media platforms through mobile media provides users opportunities to coordinate with others in online communities in real time (Humphreys 2013). Given the role of mobile media in documented cases of collective action, further insight is needed for better understanding of the conditions and mechanisms that help explain the implications of the technology in this particular context. Toward that end, this study draws from the folk theory tradition (Eslami et al. 2016; Kanthawala et al. 2019) to examine how perceptions of mobile media's essence (Rhee et al. 2021) predict intentions to use it for collective action among a sample from an understudied political group, the "Alt-Right" movement in the U.S.

Drawing from scholarship on folk theory of communication technology, Rhee and colleagues (2021) examine the perceived essence of different social media platforms, theorizing that user-oriented definitions of a technology set the parameters for understanding of what it does and how it can/should be used. In other words, essence refers to meanings users attach to media artifacts and systems that help determine their central purposes. While Rhee et al. (2021) examine perceived essence in the context of popular social media websites/applications, it is germane to other technological systems and artifacts, including the mobile phone. Given this, and the research on mobile media in collective action (Bailard 2015; Liu 2016; Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013) and coordinating with others (Ling 2012; Humphreys 2013), the present study utilizes perceived essence of mobile media, specifically as a tool for collective action, to help explain intentions to participate in racially motivated initiatives and extreme forms of protest among a sample of the Alt-Right political group. In doing so, this study makes three important and novel contributions.

To begin with, it samples participants who identify with the Alt-Right. This is a group that is under-researched (Forscher and Kteily 2020), but important to discuss in the context of collective action considering the recent cases of far-right demonstrations and political violence. Second, we extend the recently articulated concept of essence (Rhee et al. 2021) to mobile media, as well as to collective action. These contextual extensions help widen the folk theory lens and thus our understanding of how lay definitions of technology, and mobile media in particular, are enmeshed with their usage and outcomes. Third, we ask participants about willingness to participate in a novel range of collective action contexts, including offline activities and events, social media campaigns, and extreme political behavior. Altogether, the present research both deepens and expands our understanding of mobile media's role in collective action intentions, while offering new insights into an understudied group that has had a political voice in recent years.

### *1.1. Collective Action, Media, and the Far-Right*

The connections between collective action and media, as well as their importance, are likely further magnified in political contexts. Indeed, many real-world situations and examples from research (Mundt et al. 2018; Tufekci and Wilson 2012) have examined the ways in which individuals use various types of media to either participate in or facilitate politically relevant collective action. An important aspect often considered for collective action is the ability for group members to connect and communicate with each other, making social (Bimber 2017) and mobile media (Liu 2016) of theoretical and practical interest. Just as scholars are working to understand and explain the technology's role in collective action, society has experienced recent exposure to collective action events heavily supported by digital media. One of the most notable recent examples is the U.S. Capitol insurrection in 2021 (Barrett et al. 2021; Frenkel 2021).

Both in the build-up to this large-scale case of collective action and on the day of the event digital media played important roles for what eventually was to occur. For example, online spaces were utilized to align individuals around group-based norms focused on extremism, while providing a space to share polarizing content that possibly motivated some individuals to want to take action (Van Swol et al. 2022). This observation

is unsurprising given that far-right channels on social media frequently discuss collective action itself as well as mechanisms known to influence intentions (Hawkins and Saleem 2021). Other research finds that on subreddits identified for their extremism, posting behaviors shifted after the 2020 Presidential election and regularly increased in the ramp-up to the insurrection (Hiaeshutter-Rice and Hawkins 2022). Conversations online about this collective action continued both during and after the event on platforms such as Parler (Prabhu et al. 2021). Additionally, this is not the only instance of far-right collective action fueled by online content and channels, as the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville is also a recent example.

Considering the place and impact of far-right collective actions in democracy and society, it is important to further understand the ways in which emerging media technologies are supporting and/or suppressing participation in these harmful behaviors. Specific to the far-right, the literature previously discussed indicates that researchers are extensively investigating the uses and consequences of digital spaces (Hawkins and Saleem 2021; Prabhu et al. 2021; Van Swol et al. 2022). At the same time, mobile media warrant their own focus (Bailard 2015; Liu 2016; Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Mobile media uniquely connect people without being tethered to space (Campbell 2013), while also serving as a hub for other media (Humphreys et al. 2018), allowing people to be connected, informed, located, and equipped (to record, edit, broadcast) during the flows of activity and movement. As we return to soon, this study looks beyond technological features and user gratifications for novel insights into the ways that perceived essence of mobile media helps explain participation in collective action.

### 1.2. Mobile Communication and Collective Action

Mobile communication has emerged as a primary resource for collective political action, and there is a growing body of scholarship explaining how and why the technology gets taken up in this way. One early case that garnered much attention is the January 2001 ousting of Filipino President Joseph Estrada following a massive four-day protest over lack of corruption charges. Text messaging played a primary role in coordinating the demonstrations, which culminated in the collapse of Estrada's cabinet and the military siding with protesters as they escorted him out of office (Bagalawis 2001; Castells et al. 2007; Paragas 2003; Pertierra et al. 2002; Rheingold 2002). Messaging has been shown to play a key role in the coordination of many other instances of collective action around the world, including protests in South Korea (Fulford 2003), Germany (Neumayer and Stald 2014); China (Liu 2016), Spain, (Castells et al. 2007), and elsewhere (Rheingold 2002). Rheingold explains,

since the 1990s, the sudden emergence of SMS as a ubiquitous form of messaging, and the increasing interconnection between mobile phones and the Internet have made it possible for people to coordinate and organize political collective action with people they were not able to organize before, in places they weren't able to organize before, and at a speed they weren't able to muster before. (p. 226)

With the uptake of smartphones, mobile media have become a robust resource for collective action. Messaging is still central in connecting people to each other, but the technology is now also used to connect protesters with online information and social media, expanding their messaging and coordination (e.g., Tufekci and Wilson 2012, p. 369). Live broadcasting has particularly caught the attention of scholars studying mobile media and collective action. Indeed, live broadcasting can help widen a protest's audience, allowing people who cannot attend to virtually participate and provide support from the sidelines (Law 2014), while empowering protesters to feed counter-narratives to the media as the event unfolds (Neumayer and Stald 2014). As Neumayer (2020) points out, capturing and broadcasting collective action through live video broadens the protest's reach, while also having the capacity to make protesters vulnerable for retaliation as it leaves digital remnants for authorities to later sift through.

In addition to supporting anytime-anywhere connection with people, place, and media, Liu (2016) points to reciprocity as a distinctive aspect of mobile communication that uniquely supports collective action. Drawing from multiple case studies in China (before and after smartphones), Liu finds that reciprocity embedded in mobile communication networks translates into enhanced recruitment for political and collective action. He argues this is especially true in the context of China, which has a strong social system of obligation and support, commonly known as “guanxi”. Liu’s (2016) research shows that using mobile communication to recruit people into collective action leverages norms and expectations for guanxi in Chinese society. As Liu (2016) puts it, “The reciprocity in guanxi accordingly guarantees reliability, reinforces obligations, legitimates mobilization appeals, strengthens empathy and consolidates solidarity for mobilization” (p. 221). Altogether, the research in this area indicates that mobile communication has become central to collective action throughout the world. It serves as a resource for getting and sharing information, for broadcasting live events to wider audiences, for coordinating plans, logistics, and for recruiting network ties into action. As we turn to next, whether people view the technology in this light may be a key ingredient in explaining its role in collective action.

### 1.3. Folk Theories and the Essence of Mobile Media

This study draws from the folk theory of technology to frame hypotheses about mobile media’s role in collective action among this sample from the Alt-Right. Folk theories are common understandings that people develop for making sense of technological artifacts and systems (DeVito et al. 2018; Kang 2014). That is, folk theories are nonauthoritative concepts that are intuitively expressed (Kanthawala et al. 2019) and give shape to the strategies people have for understanding and using technology. Additionally, referred to as lay definitions, mental models, common understandings, and perceived essence, folk theories have been taken up in research on a number of relevant information and communication technologies, including computers, the internet, social media, sensors, health apps, RF ID, and others (DeVito et al. 2018; Eslami et al. 2016; Kanthawala et al. 2019; Rader and Slaker 2017; Toff and Nielsen 2018). The research in this area establishes that folk theories give shape to how people think technologies can and should be used (Eslami et al. 2016; Kanthawala et al. 2019; Rader and Slaker 2017). For example, Rhee et al. (2021) conducted a survey examining how people define popular social media platforms according to entertainment, news, social interaction, shopping, and other core functions. The authors found that those who report social media as a tool primarily for social interaction also view the platforms as offering characteristically high levels of affordances and resources compared to those with other lay definitions. We consider folk theories applicable to mobile media, shaping how and why people use it, with implications for collective action.

An alternative approach might be to use the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework to examine how user motivations explain mobile media’s role in this context. Indeed, U&G is one of the more popular ways to frame predictors of media uses and consequences, including with research trying to explain mobile communication’s role in how people behave politically and publicly (e.g., Campbell and Kwak 2010, 2011). However, U&G has a narrower scope with a focus on motivations for use, whereas folk theory accounts for broader orientations people have toward a technology. Folk theories reach beyond U&G’s scope of gratifications sought and are shaped by a diverse range of internal and external factors that inform what people think, feel, know, and believe about a technology (Rhee et al. 2021). Folk theory refers to the user’s overall outlook toward a technology and is informed by their experiences with it, outside information and perspectives, a technology’s features and affordances, and other endogenous and exogenous factors (DeVito et al. 2018; Kanthawala et al. 2019). Thus, folk theory offers a different angle and wider lens than U&G.

Drawing from the folk theory tradition and the literature above, this study examines how user understandings of mobile media, particularly for collective action, predict intentions for far-right political actions. In addition to being a tool for social interaction, coordination, news, entertainment, etc., mobile media have also become embedded into

the ways people collectively organize during political demonstration and protest (Liu 2016; Neumayer and Stald 2014). This point is well-demonstrated in the literature above, warranting collective action be included among the list of how people intuitively define and understand the technology. Drawing from the literature, we anticipate that perceptions of one's mobile phone as a tool for collective action will be positively associated with intentions to participate in collective political behavior (H1). In the context of our sample from the Alt-Right, we anticipate this to be the case with racially driven collective actions, offline (H1a) and on social media (H1b), as well as non-normative actions (H1c). As discussed next, we consider whether the link between technological essence and collective action intentions might be especially evident among those who rely heavily on mobile media for social coordination in daily life, a practice known as micro-coordination.

#### 1.4. The Moderating Role of Micro-Coordination

The concept of "micro-coordination" represents one of the earliest and most recognized advances in the mobile communication literature (e.g., Ling 1997; Bertel 2013; Licoppe 2004; Ling and Lai 2016). Micro-coordination refers to making social arrangements iteratively, or even entirely on the fly, rather than planning around time and space. Ling and Yttri (2002) explain micro-coordination as, "redirection of trips that have already started," "the 'softening' of time, i.e., sitting in a traffic jam and calling ahead," and situations where "in transit [users] might call each other to confirm the timing and the location" (p. 6).

As the quotes above indicate, the scholarship on micro-coordination tends to have a focus on everyday life, recognizing it as a fundamental shift away from time and space as anchors for mundane social coordination and planning (Ling and Lai 2016). Micro-coordination also plays an important role in how people communicate and move about when political protest breaks out. Ling (2012) points out that "a special case of coordination is seen in the use of mobile telephony to organize social protests" (p. 133). Previously we highlighted several cases from around the world where mobile communication, particularly messaging, was key in supporting political collective action by allowing individuals to share information and make plans iteratively and under the radar of authorities. Indeed, the literature reviewed above shows instrumental coordination to be a primary function of mobile media during collective action. Before and after the uptake of smartphones, mobile messaging has played a central role in communicating updates and the movements of protesters and authorities trying to track and stop them (Bagalawis 2001; Castells et al. 2007; Neumayer 2020; Paragas 2003; Pertierra et al. 2002).

With the uptake of smartphones, access to the internet, social media, geo-locational services, and live video broadcasting have widened mobile media's reach in the coordination of both everyday life and collective action. Aside from these instrumental uses of the technology, Liu (2016) further argues that personal relationships cultivated through mobile communication networks foster, if not call for, reciprocity in recruitment of network ties to join in collective action. Thus, there are reasons to question, if not anticipate, how "the politics of mundanity" associated with micro-coordination may translate into bolstering intentions to participate in "moments of madness" (Liu 2016) and other forms of collective action among far-right groups.

RQ1: How does micro-coordination interact with perceived essence to predict racially driven and extreme collective action intentions?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

This study received exempt approval from an Institutional Review Board at a university in the U.S. The present research is part of a larger project examining questions related to race, far-right ideology, and media in today's digital and political environment. Data were collected using the research platform *CloudResearch*, an online-based platform where researchers can post studies and recruit participants (Litman et al. 2017). This study consisted of 337 participants who self-identified as White and reported that they use social

media. This project was interested in sampling individuals who self-identified as Alt-Right. Adapting existing methods (Forscher and Kteily 2020) we considered Alt-Right participants to be those who scored five or above on a 7-point measure of identification with Alt-Right views ( $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) and who also identified as Republican. To strengthen our confidence that participants identified with the Alt-Right, at the end of the survey participants indicated “how strongly do you identify with the Alt-Right” on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very strongly*). The data demonstrated that overall participants strongly identified with the Alt-Right,  $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ . Demographic information revealed a slight majority of female ( $N = 185$ , 54.9%) compared to male ( $N = 152$ , 45.1%) participants,  $M_{age} = 43.51$ ,  $SD = 13.09$ . In the context of religion, most participants reported Christianity ( $N = 291$ , 86.4%), or “none” ( $N = 31$ , 9.2%), with no other religious group consisting of more than 3% ( $N = 15$ , 4.4%).

## 2.2. Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from all individuals involved in the study. Participants began by answering a set of demographic questions to indicate if they were eligible for the study. They were then asked about their experiences using digital media, including the type of content that they regularly see, as well as questions assessing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors they engage in related to their new media use. Given that many who identify with the Alt-Right are highly suspicious of academics and their research, all participants read a statement adapted from previous research (Forscher and Kteily 2020) to address any concerns about their identities being revealed. For further information, see supplementary information in the Supplemental Materials.

## 2.3. Measures

**Identification with Alt-Right views.** One item was adapted from previous research (Forscher and Kteily 2020) to determine identification with Alt-Right views: “How often do you identify with the views of the Alt-Right?” Individuals responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*),  $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ . Participants were recognized as Alt-Right supporters if they identified as Republican and scored five or above on this item.

**Mobile phone essence as collective action.** Six items were adapted from previous research (Rhee et al. 2021) to identify whether participants viewed their mobile phone as a tool for collective action. Items included, my mobile phone is a tool for . . . , “collective action”, “protest”, and “political demonstration”, on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*),  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $\alpha = 0.88$ .

**Micro-coordination.** Using a scale adapted from previous research (Vanden Abeele 2016), participants indicated whether they use their mobile phones for micro-coordination. The four items included I use my mobile phone to, “make arrangements about who will be where when”, and “make arrangements with friends and family”, on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*),  $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ,  $\alpha = 0.85$ .

**Collective action intentions offline.** Willingness to participate in collective actions that explicitly benefit White people was assessed using three items adapted from previous research (Glasford and Calcagno 2012). Participants rated their agreement with statements including, “I would participate in a demonstration with the goal of improving the position of Whites in America”, “I would sign a petition to stop discrimination against Whites in America”, and “I would pass out or post flyers about injustices facing Whites in America”. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*),  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $\alpha = 0.87$ .

**Collective action intentions on social media.** Four items were adapted from previous research (Chan 2014; Glasford and Calcagno 2012) and used to assess participants’ willingness to use social media to participate in collective actions that explicitly benefit White people. Participants rated their agreement with statements including, “I would sign a petition online or on social media to stop discrimination against Whites in America”, “I would like, retweet, or upvote a comment that is supportive of Whites as a group”,

“I would share information about the injustices faced by White Americans with my network on social media”, and “I would encourage other White Americans on social media to take action to support their group”. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*),  $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

Non-normative/extreme collective action intentions. Participants were asked about their willingness to participate in collective actions that might be considered extreme using four items adapted from previous research (Becker et al. 2011). Items included I would be willing to, “block government buildings”, “block streets or highways”, “engage in rioting”, and “use physical force”, on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*),  $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ .

Demographics and controls. Participants answered questions that were used as controls in all of the following analyses. This included sex, income, and education. Additionally, participants also indicated the extent to which they viewed their mobile phone as an essential social tool in their everyday lives (Rhee et al. 2021). Items included my mobile phone is a tool for entertainment, news, events, and social interaction and were also used as control variables.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Mobile Phone Essence as Collective Action

For correlations of key measures see Table 1. We first examined how perceptions of mobile devices as a tool for collective action affects intentions to participate in different examples of collective action that would exclusively benefit White people. This included collective actions offline (H1a), on social media (H1b), and that are considered non-normative (H1c). We investigated our hypotheses using three linear regressions that featured mobile phone essence collective action entered as a predictor and controlled for the variables specified above (for the full model see Table S1–S3 in the Supplementary Materials). The data show that there is a significant positive relationship between perceptions of mobile media as a tool for collective action and intentions to participate in actions offline,  $b = 0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , on social media,  $b = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and that are non-normative,  $b = 0.63$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . These findings indicate that when individuals have higher beliefs that their mobile device can be used as a tool for protest and demonstration, they also have increased intentions to participate in multiple different types of collective action, strongly supporting H1a, H1b, and H1c.

**Table 1.** Bivariate correlation for key measures.

| Measure               | 1       | 2       | 3        | 4       | 5       | 6 |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|----------|---------|---------|---|
| 1. Alt-Right Identity | —       |         |          |         |         |   |
| 2. Essence CA         | 0.12 *  | —       |          |         |         |   |
| 3. Microcoordination  | −0.01   | 0.12 *  | —        |         |         |   |
| 4. CA offline         | 0.12 *  | 0.52 ** | −0.03    | —       |         |   |
| 5. CA social media    | 0.18 ** | 0.40 ** | 0.01     | 0.79 ** | —       |   |
| 6. CA non-normative   | 0.21 ** | 0.55 ** | −0.23 ** | 0.56 ** | 0.42 ** | — |

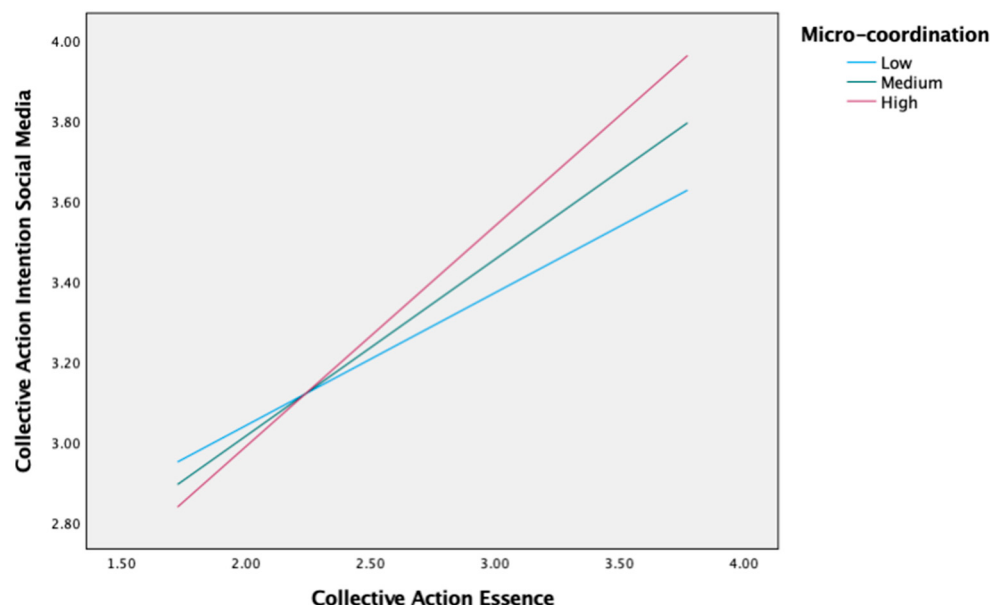
Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ;  $N = 337$ ; CA = collective action.

#### 3.2. Tests of Moderation

To this point, we have established that the ways in which individuals perceive their mobile phone as a tool for various tasks (e.g., collective action) is related to the extent to which they intend to participate in actions. We were also interested in whether the degree to which participants use their phone for micro-coordination might work as a moderating mechanism and help further explain these behavioral intentions (e.g., RQ1). Using the PROCESS macro Model 1 (Hayes and Preacher 2014) with 5000 bootstrapped samples and

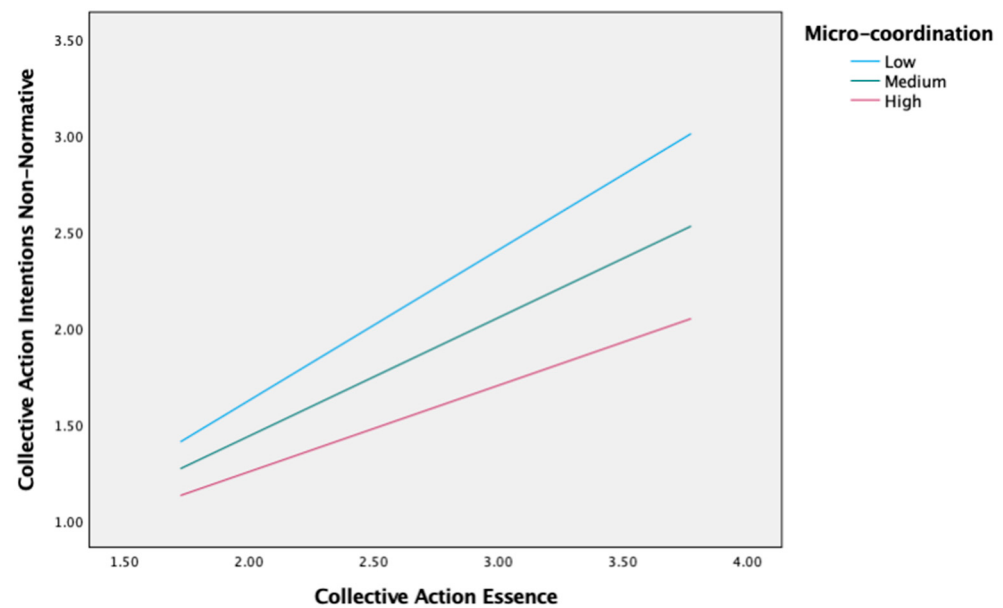
controlling for the variables described above, we did not find a significant interaction effect between mobile phone collective action essence and micro-coordination for intentions to participate in offline collective actions,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.245$ ,  $CI = [-0.067, 0.261]$ . However, we did find a significant interaction between mobile media essence collective action and micro-coordination for intentions to participate in online collective actions,  $b = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ,  $CI = [0.001, 0.324]$ .

The significant interaction was further interpreted by examining the conditional effect at low ( $-1$  SD), medium (mean), and high ( $+1$  SD) levels of micro-coordination. The results show that a significant positive effect is found between perceptions of mobile phones as a tool for collective action and collective action intentions online at each level of the moderator (e.g., micro-coordination), low micro-coordination,  $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.165, 0.496]$ , medium micro-coordination,  $b = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.319, 0.560]$ , and high micro-coordination,  $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.391, 0.707]$ . Although the conditional effect was significant at all levels of micro-coordination, the data and an examination of Figure 1 indicates that participants who report the highest belief that their mobile phone is a tool for collective action and also frequently use their mobile phone for micro-coordination are the individuals most likely to participate in collective actions beneficial to White Americans on social media.



**Figure 1.** Interaction effects of viewing mobile phones as a tool for collective action and micro-coordination on intentions to participate in collective actions using social media.

Finally, for the intentions to participate in non-normative collective actions outcome we found a significant interaction between mobile phone essence collective action and micro-coordination,  $b = -0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [-0.384, -0.112]$ . This interaction was interpreted using the same strategy outlined earlier. Similar to above, we found a significant positive effect at each level of the moderator for low micro-coordination,  $b = 0.78$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.642, 0.921]$ , medium micro-coordination,  $b = 0.61$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.514, 0.716]$ , and high micro-coordination,  $b = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI = [0.315, 0.581]$ . However, these conditional effects differ from above as it is those who are lowest in micro-coordination that report the highest intentions to participate in non-normative collective action (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Interaction effects of viewing mobile phones as a tool for collective action and micro-coordination on intentions to participate in non-normative collective actions.

#### 4. Discussion

Mobile media have become embedded into everyday life (Ling 2012), and are used as a resource for coordinating with others, getting work done, relieving boredom, and participating in civic and political life. In examining the relationship between mobile media and politics it is difficult to highlight a single area of most importance. However, recent events in the U.S. such as the BLM protests (Mundt et al. 2018) and the Capitol insurrection (Frenkel 2021) indicate that mobile media, in conjunction with the wider digital ecology, are becoming increasingly important for collective action. Additionally, the ways in which mobile media are used for collective action is not just happening in the United States, but is relevant and occurring throughout the world (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Indeed, further attention is needed to more completely understand the underlying mechanisms that facilitate and explain the relationships among mobile media and collective action. One such element is the perceived essence of communication technologies, such as social media platforms (Rhee et al. 2021) and mobile media, based on the various and different purposes they are perceived to fulfill. This study contributes to this conversation by adding collective action as a context in which people develop folk-theory understandings of communication technology (DeVito et al. 2018; Kanthawala et al. 2019), while demonstrating its capacity to help explain mobile media's role in intentions for joining in different forms of political behavior in an understudied group.

First, as proposed in the first set of hypotheses (H1a–H1c), the data indicate that viewing the mobile phone as a tool for collective action is positively associated with intentions to participate in pro-White actions offline, on social media, and that are non-normative for this sample of Alt-Right individuals. Previous research (e.g., Rhee et al. 2021) indicates that people tend to view their media as having an essence that is central to how it can and should be used. Such lay understandings are critical as they provide information on the mental outlook that shapes usage and other outcomes (Eslami et al. 2016; Kanthawala et al. 2019; Rader and Slaker 2017). Unsurprisingly, the concept of essence has tended to focus on the ways in which technology is used for different types of social interaction (dating and events), everyday tasks (shopping), and media-seeking behaviors (news and entertainment). However, to think that these uses are the only ways in which people engage with social or mobile media is clearly limiting (Bailard 2015; Liu 2016; Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Our results indicate that not only do individuals view their mobile phones as a tool for collective action, but that this view helps explain

various types of action intentions. While intentions are not the same as actual behaviors, extensive research shows that these intentions can be predictive of future participation in the described collective actions (Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). Altogether, the application of folk theory shows that how individuals understand the essence of mobile media (i.e., what kind of tool it is) is not inconsequential and warrants further attention in this, if not other, areas of mobile communication research.

Second, we find that micro-coordination plays a moderating role, in most cases strengthening positive links between essence and action intentions. Although this was not the case with offline Alt-Right activities, higher reported levels of micro-coordination strengthened the positive links between perceived essence and collective action intentions for engaging in social media spaces. Indeed, those who reported increased perceptions of their device as a tool for collective action and also were highest in using it for micro-coordination reported being most likely to engage in pro-White social media campaigns. While the relationship between essence perceptions and different levels of micro-coordination were significant and positive at each level (e.g., low, medium, high micro-coordination), the data and Figure 1 clearly show this relationship to be strongest among those high in essence and high in micro-coordination. It is interesting that micro-coordination moderates online but not offline collective action. One possible explanation is that offline collective actions are relatively more costly from a time and effort standpoint. Additionally, given that micro-coordination and online collective actions both involve using and engaging with mobile media, there is likely some type of synergy that is going on between them.

Given the result above, it was of particular interest that we found a different pattern in micro-coordination's moderating effect for intentions to participate in non-normative actions. The data from this test showed that those at the lowest level of micro-coordination reported the greatest intention to participate in types of collective action that are non-normative. In other words, micro-coordination has a positive interactive effect for non-normative behavior, but mainly for those who micro-coordinate relatively little in their own everyday lives. Although it may seem puzzling on the surface, this relationship also makes sense if we consider it through a normative lens. In this case, the criterion variable reflects behavior that is by definition not normal. It represents a desire to disrupt, not maintain social order. It makes sense that people with socially disruptive behavior intentions may have less opportunity, motivation, and/or reasons to coordinate socially with other people in their daily lives, which may help in interpreting this interaction.

Overall, the significant patterns for micro-coordination's role as a moderator trend positive, suggesting that it may be a meaningful condition that brings essence into closer conversation with collective action and behavioral intentions. At the same time, nuances in the significant patterns for social media and extreme political behavior, along with the lack of a significant moderating effect for certain contexts of offline collective action, point to areas warranting further explanation and investigation. These findings, along with those discussed above, provide at least three important implications that deserve further discussion.

## 5. Implications

First, the present research provides a theoretical contribution to the recently articulated concept of essence (Rhee et al. 2021) by extending it to an additional media context (mobile media) and to a new defining factor (collective action). As indicated by Rhee and colleagues (2021), and the current study, the essence that users attach to their media is important. Plenty of existing research and models such as Uses and Gratifications Theory (Ruggiero 2000) have explored why individuals choose to engage with various different types of media. Through folk theory and the application of essence, we build upon this line of thinking and provide understanding of how users define their mobile media, which can shape attitudes and understandings of what it has to offer and how it can/should be used (Rhee et al. 2021). Specific to the present study, viewing mobile media as a tool for collective

action helps explain intentions to join in various forms of political demonstration, ranging from support for a social media campaign to non-normative offline political actions. Our findings offer evidence consistent with propositions that mobile media tend to support, as opposed to suppress, collective action (Bailard 2015), especially when their users view them as an “essential” tool for these purposes. This is not inconsequential as the relation between collective action and new media technologies is becoming more interconnected (Bimber 2017).

Second, we examine the relationships described above in a unique sample, those who identify with the far-right. This population is typically difficult to reach and is often under-represented in both public opinion and academic research (Forscher and Kteily 2020). However, far-right groups have been identified as participating in different types of collective action. For example, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville (Keneally 2018) and the riot at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th 2021 (Frenkel 2021) are both considered non-normative collective actions. Given the recent actions taken by members of this group, and their position as part of the texture of U.S. politics, more research is needed to understand how and why they translate their convictions into action, especially collective action with violent and pro-White intentions. Findings from this study provide a foundation by pointing to everyday life perceptions (essence) and practices (micro-coordination) as theoretically and empirically meaningful in explaining collective action intentions among members of this group. Third, we examine intentions to participate in three different types of Alt-Right collective action, including offline, social media, and non-normative. Participation in collective action is diverse, and can take place in many different contexts and formats. This is even further magnified when considering either the topic around which action is taken or the group taking action. By asking about a broad range of collective action types, we can more completely evaluate in what situations individuals are willing to take action and how media factors can differentially support these action intentions.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

The contributions of this study should be read in light of some important limitations. First, data were collected using a cross-sectional survey, limiting the ability to establish a causal relationship between perceived essence of mobile media and collective action. Given the results of these cross-sectional data, future research should continue to explore the direction of influence between micro-coordination, belief in the essence of mobile media, and collective action using longitudinal and experimental approaches, where possible. Second, the items related to collective action only asked individuals about intentions, rather than a behavioral measure of actual participation. Measuring collective action behaviors using survey methods can be difficult, especially given the context in which collective action was examined in the current study both in relation to its breadth (e.g., multiple types of collective action) and its inclusion of non-normative action. Additionally, existing research has identified that intentions are strongly associated with behavior in this area (Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). However, future research should further explore the implications of how the intentions used in this study translate to behavioral actions.

Third, the specific sample examined in this study (e.g., the Alt-Right) is an additional limitation. The current research focused on individuals who self-identified as having views considered Alt-Right. Our inclusion of this group is also a strength given the lack of research related to far-right individuals and the relevance of this group to outcomes like collective action. Although, the generalizability does need to be considered. Indeed, generalizing our results to larger populations or even other groups that use mobile media to coordinate and participate in collective action is less clear. Further research should continue to examine other groups focused on collective action and digital spaces such as BLM (Mundt et al. 2018) to understand if the findings are generalizable between groups. The strategy of identifying Alt-Right participants provides another limitation. This study

employed a single item to determine individuals who identified with this group. This was adapted from existing research (Forscher and Kteily 2020), but given the dearth of research sampling far-right populations further research needs to introduce additional and nuanced ways of identifying Alt-Right participants. Finally, the scope of essence is limited in this study, with a measure asking about perceptions of one's "mobile phone." Mobile media encapsulates more than just the device, including apps, content, flows, and infrastructures. Moving forward, scholars should look beyond the device itself for a more robust understanding of the essence users attached to mobile media.

## 7. Conclusions

The current research, using the recently articulated concept of essence (Rhee et al. 2021), identifies a positive connection between the perception of mobile phones as a tool for collective action and willingness to participate in various forms (e.g., offline, online, and non-normative) of collective political behavior. Additionally, we find moderating effects with micro-coordination strengthening some of these relationships. Theoretically, our data show that in the context of politically relevant outcomes (e.g., collective action intentions), perceptions about mobile devices and their uses are not inconsequential. Rather, they can help shed light on factors that may have contributed to collective action events that have already ensued, such as the U.S. Capitol insurrection. This study also highlights the implications and role that mobile media will likely have for future cases of collective action that will occur both in the United States and across the world. Further research on the multi-faceted role of mobile media as a resource for collective action will continue to be needed as the technology increasingly becomes a tool for the organization and maintenance of relationships across political and digital spectra. The findings from this study point to essence as a promising point of entry, and the moderating effects for micro-coordination suggest that future research in this area should account for other everyday uses of the technology that may help set the stage for political behavior.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia4010018/s1>, Information S1, Table S1: Linear model predicting offline collective action intentions; Table S2: Linear model predicting collective action intentions on social media; Table S3: title Linear model predicting non-normative collective actions.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, I.H. and S.W.C.; methodology, I.H. and S.W.C.; software, I.H.; validation, I.H., S.W.C. and A.G.; formal analysis, I.H.; investigation, I.H., and S.W.C.; resources, I.H., and S.W.C.; data curation, I.H.; writing—original draft preparation, I.H., S.W.C., and A.G.; writing—review and editing, I.H., S.W.C., and A.G.; visualization, I.H.; supervision, I.H., and S.W.C.; project administration, I.H., and S.W.C.; funding acquisition, I.H., and S.W.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the University of Michigan (HUM00210615; Date of Approval: 3 January 2022).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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