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Lightsticks and Youth Politics in Daegu: Patterns of Participation, Collective Action, and Political Demands*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the characteristics and perceptions of youth participants in Daegu’s pro-impeachment “lightstick protests” that emerged after the martial law declaration on December 3, 2024. Drawing on two on-site face-to-face surveys conducted on Dongseong-ro—December 14, 2024 (the first wave, N=72) and January 18, 2025 (the second wave, N=110)—it examines who participated, how they joined, why they participated, and what they demanded. The results show that participants were predominantly young women and included diverse occupational groups such as students, job seekers, and young workers, with relatively high proportions of lower-and middle-status respondents in subjective socioeconomic status. They generally leaned progressive and reported comparatively high political efficacy. Mobilization relied less on organized recruitment by parties or organizations and more on SNS-based diffusion and loose networks; familiar fandom repertoires—lightsticks, placards, and hashtags—were adapted to the protest setting, lowering participation barriers and facilitating collective gathering. Many participants also evaluated the “lightstick mode” as a legitimate and effective form of protest. Participation was driven by perceiving martial law as a serious threat to democratic norms and by a civic sense of responsibility to defend democracy, combined with accumulated dissatisfaction with policy failures under the Yoon Suk Yeol

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government. Beyond demanding impeachment, participants called for transformation of local politics, restoration of democracy, and expansion of political representation. The study empirically demonstrates how youth form political subjectivity through nonconventional participation even under constraints posed by a conservative-dominant regional context.

Keywords
December 3 Martial Law Declaration; Lightstick Protests; Regional Youth; Political Representation; Non-Conventional Political Participation

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응원봉을 든 대구의 청년들: 참여 양태, 집합행동, 정치적 요구*

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요약

본 연구는 2024년 12월 3일 비상계엄 선포 이후 대구에서 전개된 탄핵 찬성 '응원봉 시위' 참여 청년들의 특성과 인식을 분석하였다. 2024년 12월 14일(1차 조사, N=72)과 2025년 1월 18일(2차 조사, N=110) 동성로 현장에서 실시한 대면 설문조사를 바탕으로 참여 주체, 참여 경로, 참여 동기, 요구를 검토하였다. 분석 결과, 참여자는 주로 여성 청년이었으며, 학생뿐 아니라 취업준비생과 청년 노동자 등 다양한 직업집단으로 구성되었고 주관적 계층에서도 중·하층 비중이 높았다. 이들은 전반적으로 진보 성향을 보였고 정치효능감 수준도 비교적 높았다. 참여 경로는 정당·단체의 조직적 동원보다는 SNS를 통한 정보 확산과 느슨한 네트워크에 의해 이루어졌으며, 응원봉·피켓·해시태그 등 팬덤 문화에서 익숙한 참여 양식이 시위 현장에 적용되면서 참여 장벽을 낮추고 결집을 촉진했다. 또한 다수의 참여자는 이러한 '응원봉 방식'을 시위의 정당하고 효과적인 참여 방식으로 긍정적으로 평가했다. 참여 동기는 비상계엄을 민주주의 규범에 대한 중대한 위협으로 인식하고 이를 지켜야 한다는 시민적 책임감을 느낀 데 더해, 윤석열 정부의 정책 실패에 대한 누적된 불만이 결합되면서 형성되었다. 참여자들은 탄핵 요구를 넘어 지역 정치 변화, 민주주의 복원, 정치적 대표성 확대를 요구하였다. 본 연구는 보수 독점적 지역 맥락이라는 제약 속에서도 청년들이 비관습적 참여를 통해 정치적 주체성을 형성해 가는 과정을 실증적으로 제시한다.

주제어

12·3비상계엄, 응원봉 시위, 지역청년, 정치적 대표성, 비관습적 정치참여

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Ⅰ. Introduction

On December 3, 2024, the Yoon Suk yeol administration's declaration of martial law abruptly disrupted the taken-for-granted belief that democracy in South Korea is working properly (Yonhap News, April 3, 2025). Once martial law emerged as a realistic political option, democracy was no longer experienced as an abstract ideal but reappeared as an immediate struggle over institutional rules and fundamental rights. In response, pro-impeachment lightstick protests rapidly diffused across the country as a form of non-conventional political participation. Organized primarily through online networks and employing K-pop fandom lightsticks as symbolic tools, these protests lowered barriers to street mobilization and expanded the repertoire of contention beyond conventional models centered on civic organizations or political parties. While historically continuous with earlier candlelight demonstrations, lightstick protests also represent a distinctive participatory mode that fuses cultural practice with digital networking (Choi, 2025).

Existing research on protest participation following the December 3 martial law declaration can be broadly divided into two strands. Cultural-political accounts analyze how K-pop fandom repertoires were repurposed into political resistance through the visual and affective medium of lightsticks (Choi, 2025). Gender-focused studies emphasize care-oriented and solidaristic practices led primarily by women in their twenties and thirties, interpreting these dynamics as contributing to forms of "feminist peace"[1] and the emergence of new counter-public spheres (Yoo, 2025; Cho, Jeong, & Lee, 2025). Together, these studies illuminate novel modes of participation and democratic values associated with lightstick protests. This study builds on these insights but advances the literature in a different direction. Rather than treating cultural repertoires or gendered practices as self-sufficient explanations, it situates them within a regionally specific political context characterized by long-term single-party dominance and persistent representational deficits. By focusing on Daegu as a least-likely case, this study demonstrates how cultural and gendered forms of participation acquire distinct political meanings when they intersect with entrenched local political structures and a sudden democratic rupture. In doing so, the study contributes a contextualized account of pro-democratic mobilization that links cultural-political and gender-centered perspectives to questions of political representation, regional inequality, and democratic legitimacy.

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[1] Feminist peace is a concept employed by Yoo (2025) to interpret the participation of women in their twenties and thirties in the pro-impeachment protests against Yoon Suk yeol. The concept understands peace not as the absence of armed conflict, but as the removal of gender-based discrimination and everyday forms of violence.

This limitation is particularly consequential in regional settings such as Daegu, where long-term single-party dominance has consolidated a conservative-dominant political environment since democratization. Although competitive elections have been held regularly, political pluralism has remained structurally constrained, fostering persistent perceptions among young people and women that their political preferences and concerns are insufficiently represented through electoral and party politics. In this context, the declaration of martial law on December 3 functioned not merely as an abrupt political shock, but as a catalyst that legitimized the public articulation of long-standing democratic grievances. Following the declaration, large numbers of young people—especially young women—gathered in central areas such as Dongseong-ro to express explicit pro-impeachment demands.

This mobilization raises a set of core empirical questions: who participated, how they joined through channels such as social media and fandom repertoires, why they participated in relation to perceived democratic crisis, accumulated policy dissatisfaction, and representational deficits, and what political demands they ultimately advanced.

To address these questions, this study conducted two waves of face-to-face surveys at protest sites in Daegu—first on December 14, 2024, and subsequently on January 18, 2025. The first wave relied primarily on open-ended questions to capture participants' diverse motivations and meaning-making processes, while the second wave employed closed-ended items to systematically measure key variables. Drawing on both waves, the study examines who participated, how and why they participated, and what they demanded, thereby providing an empirically grounded account of regional youth participation that has remained largely marginal in Seoul-centered discussions of South Korea's recent democratic crisis.

Ⅱ. Theoretical Background

Non-conventional political participation tends to increase when institutional channels are constrained or when citizens perceive that existing institutions fail to represent their interests. Its defining feature is not merely "street politics," but the capacity to articulate political demands in the public sphere and to raise the political costs of inaction for decision-makers (Barnes & Kaase, 1979, pp. 1–35; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, pp. 7–28).

Classical theories of social movements explain the emergence of non-conventional participation through three interrelated analytical lenses: resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and collective framing and emotions. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes that grievances alone rarely generate collective action. Participation becomes politically consequential only when grievances are combined with mobilizing resources and civic skills, including organizations, networks, time, and information (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pp. 1–19). Political opportunity structure approaches highlight how the configuration of party competition and the responses of state institutions shape participation by altering the perceived costs, risks, and expected benefits of political action. Under certain conditions, these structural shifts open "windows of opportunity" that render participation both feasible and impactful (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, pp. 1–23). Framing and emotional approaches complement these perspectives by demonstrating that political action is not driven solely by instrumental calculation. Emotions such as anger, fear, hope, and solidarity activate participation, while collective action expands when symbolic frames that interpret grievances and articulate demands become widely shared. In contemporary settings, this process increasingly takes the form of connective action mediated by digital media, in which individualized narratives are linked through emotional resonance and voluntary meaning-making (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, pp. 35–52). Non-conventional participation can thus be understood as a dynamic process produced through the interaction of external conditions—such as mobilizing resources and political structures—and internal dynamics, including framing processes and emotions.

Recent protest movements have increasingly diffused through loose networks organized around social media rather than through centralized organizations such as political parties or labor unions. Participation in these contexts depends less on strong collective identity and more on horizontal linkage created by the circulation of personalized messages and content, consistent with the logic of connective action (Papacharissi, 2015). Digital public spheres also function as sites where emotional energies accumulate and intensify. When emotions become embedded in digital content, they spread rapidly and generate affective publics[2], in which collective engagement is driven by shared emotional resonance rather than formal organizational coordination (Papacharissi, 2015). From this perspective, the participation of K-pop fandoms in protest should not be understood as a mere expression of cultural taste. Instead, fandoms can be conceptualized as a mobilizing infrastructure that combines preexisting networks, symbolic repertoires, and information-sharing mechanisms in ways that facilitate collective action (Swidler, 1986, pp. 273–286). Domestic scholarship similarly shows that fandom participation expands connective action by institutionalizing ethics of gifting and solidarity (Kim, 2025), producing gendered fields of cultural politics (Cho, Jeong, & Lee, 2025), and reconstructing protest culture in festive, inclusive, and emotionally expressive forms (Yoo, 2025, pp. 381–420).

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[2] Affective publics refer to loosely networked publics mobilized through the circulation of emotions rather than rational deliberation or formal collective identities. Introduced by Zizi Papacharissi(2015), the concept explains how political participation in digital media contexts emerges through shared emotional intensity—such as anger, solidarity, or hope—circulating via social media and online narratives, thereby calling publics into being without centralized organization.

These theoretical perspectives are particularly useful for understanding protest participation in Daegu, where long-term single-party dominance has entrenched a conservative-dominant political environment and limited opportunities for alternative political voices to be effectively represented. Although competitive elections have been regularly held, many young people—especially young women—have experienced electoral and party politics as insufficiently responsive to their concerns. Against this backdrop, the declaration of martial law on December 3 was interpreted not simply as an authoritarian measure, but as a moment that provided a clear justification for demanding political change. Rather than generating new grievances, martial law crystallized long-standing perceptions of political exclusion and underrepresentation, enabling participants to frame their opposition as a legitimate defense of democracy. In this sense, opposition to martial law and support for impeachment functioned as a means of asserting that politics must change—not only at the national level, but also within Daegu's entrenched local political order. Participation thus expressed an effort to publicly articulate demands for democratic renewal and regional political transformation. In this process, online networks and fandom repertoires played a crucial mediating role by translating subjective experiences of exclusion into collective action. Participation practices centered on lightsticks and social media horizontally connected fragmented individuals, lowered barriers to entry, and transformed regional isolation into a shared sense of solidarity.

Importantly, this study does not treat the digital public sphere as a sufficient explanation for the direction of mobilization. Digital platforms facilitated both pro-democratic and anti-democratic responses following the declaration of martial law. The key analytical question, therefore, is not whether digital networks enabled mobilization, but under what conditions they facilitated pro-democratic rather than authoritarian collective action. This study argues that the direction of mobilization was shaped by the interaction between digital connectivity and context-specific factors, including long-standing representational deficits, heightened perceptions of democratic rupture, and regionally embedded political constraints. In Daegu, digital public spaces functioned as channels through which accumulated grievances and experiences of exclusion were translated into a collective defense of democratic norms, rather than as neutral arenas of political contention.

Accordingly, this study addresses four core questions: Who were the young people who participated in the lightstick protests in Daegu? How did they come to participate? Why did they join the protests? And what political demands did they articulate?

III. Research Design: Analytical Methods and Data Collection

This study conducted two rounds of survey research in the Dongseong-ro area of Daegu to examine patterns and perceptions of pro-impeachment protest participation among young people following the December 3 declaration of martial law. In both waves, trained researchers administered face-to-face interviews with respondents at protest sites.

The first survey employed an open-ended questionnaire to capture a wide range of participants' experiences, motivations, and meaning-making processes. The second survey utilized closed-ended questions to systematically measure key variables identified from the first wave. The study population was defined as young people aged

<Table 1> Survey Design and Data Collection

Survey Design and Data Collection		
Category	First Wave	Second Wave
Date	December 14, 2024 (Sat.)	January 18, 2025 (Sat.)
Method	Face-to-face interviews	Face-to-face interviews
Questionnaire Type	Open-ended	Closed-ended
Number of Surveyors	13	11
Number of Respondents (Aged 10-39)	72	110
Location	Dongseong-ro area, Daegu	

10 to 39 years, reflecting the age groups most visibly represented in the protests (see Table 1).

The first survey was conducted on Saturday, December 14, 2024, the day the National Assembly of South Korea held a plenary vote on the impeachment motion against Yoon Suk yeol in response to the declaration of martial law on December 3. The motion passed with 204 votes in favor and 85 against, following the failure of the initial vote on December 7. With the passage of the motion, the president's powers were immediately suspended and the prime minister assumed the role of acting president, marking a period of acute political instability. Amid this rapid institutional upheaval, citizens mobilized in large numbers to demand impeachment. According to media reports, approximately 30,000 to 40,000 people participated in the pro-impeachment demonstration held in the Dongseong-ro area on that day (Jeong, 2024; Ryu & Jeong, 2024).

The second survey was conducted on Saturday, January 18, 2025, during the period following the passage of the impeachment motion, when presidential powers remained suspended and the country was governed under an acting presidency. During this time, an unprecedented political situation unfolded in which Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, serving as acting president, was himself impeached and suspended from office. Consequently, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance Choi Sang-mok assumed the role of acting president. Simultaneously, the Constitutional Court of Korea formally initiated impeachment trial proceedings, including preliminary hearings and preparatory sessions. As a result, political tensions persisted as street-level mobilization and institutional politics became tightly intertwined (Cho, 2024; Constitutional Court of Korea, Office of the Public Information Officer, 2025). Media estimates suggest that approximately 1,000 to 2,000 participants attended the pro-impeachment rally in Dongseong-ro on January 18 (Lee, 2025; Sim, 2025).

Although both surveys were conducted after the declaration of martial law, they captured participation under different political moments. The first survey was conducted on December 14, 2024, the day the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion, during a peak phase of mass mobilization marked by acute institutional uncertainty and heightened public pressure on political elites. Participation at this stage was oriented toward affirming and sustaining the impeachment outcome amid concerns over democratic backsliding. By contrast, the second survey was conducted on January 18, 2025, during a post-impeachment phase characterized by prolonged political instability, including successive acting presidencies and the initiation of Constitutional Court proceedings. Participation in this later phase reflected a smaller but more persistent mobilization, shaped by continued uncertainty regarding the impeachment trial and the broader trajectory of democratic recovery. While this study does not aim to systematically compare attitudinal differences across the two waves, recognizing these distinct political contexts helps to situate potential variations in participation and demands.

Both surveys employed a convenience sampling strategy conducted on site at protest venues. Because no official roster or sampling frame of impeachment protest participants existed, probability sampling was not feasible. Respondents were therefore selected from among young people actively participating in the demonstrations whose characteristics aligned with the research objectives. As a result, the samples are not statistically representative of the entire youth population in Daegu or of all protest participants. Nevertheless, the two waves of field data provide rich micro-level evidence on who participated, how they came to participate, why they joined the protests, and what demands they articulated.

Based on this research design, the study offers a multidimensional account of pro-impeachment protest participation among young people in Daegu by combining descriptive statistical analysis of the closed-ended survey data with qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses.

Ⅳ. Who Participated in the Protests?

1. Socioeconomic Background of Protest Participants

Table 2 summarizes the socioeconomic characteristics of respondents across the two on-site surveys (first wave n = 72; second wave n = 110). Participants were predominantly young, with those in their twenties comprising the largest age group in both waves (first wave: 62.50%; second wave: 71.82%). Women constituted a clear majority of respondents (first wave: 88.89%; second wave: 75.45%), a pattern consistent with existing accounts that emphasize the central role of young women in lightstick protests (Kim, 2024; Jang, 2024).

Most respondents were residents of Daegu (first wave: 75.00%; second wave: 85.45%), indicating that the protests were primarily rooted in the local youth population rather than driven by external participants. In terms of occupational status, students formed the largest group in both waves (first wave: 72.22%; second wave: 57.27%). However, participation was not limited to students alone. Job seekers accounted for a nontrivial share of respondents (first wave: 9.72%; second wave: 12.73%), as did young workers, including non-regular employees (first wave: 2.78%; second wave: 17.27%) and regular employees (first wave: 12.50%; second wave: 7.27%). This distribution suggests that protest participation extended beyond campus-based activism to encompass young people experiencing diverse and often precarious labor market positions.

With respect to subjective class identification, a large majority of respondents described themselves as middle class or below (first wave: 80.56%; second wave: 90.90%). Taken together, these patterns indicate that participation in the Daegu lightstick protests was driven primarily by ordinary rather than socioeconomically privileged youth, reinforcing the interpretation of the protests as a broadly accessible form of non-conventional political participation.

<Table 2> Socioeconomic Background of Survey Respondents

Category		First Wave (n=72)		Second Wave (n=110)	
		N	%	N	%
Age Group	Teens	26	36.11	29	26.36
	Twenties	45	62.5	79	71.82
	Thirties	1	1.39	2	1.82
	Total	72	100	110	100
Gender	Female	64	88.89	83	75.45
	Male	8	11.11	24	21.82
	Third gender	–	–	3	2.73
	Total	72	100	110	100
Region (Metropolitan)	Gyeongbuk	15	20.83	12	10.91
	Daegu	54	75	94	85.45
	Other	3	4.17	4	3.64
	Total	72	100	110	100
Occupation	Student	52	72.22	63	57.27
	Job seeker	7	9.72	14	12.73
	Non-regular worker	2	2.78	19	17.27
	Regular worker	9	12.5	8	7.27
	Other	2	2.78	6	5.45
	Total	72	100	110	100
Subjective socioeconomic status	Upper	–	–	2	1.82
	Upper-middle	14	19.44	8	7.27
	Middle	40	55.56	74	67.27
	Lower-middle	18	25	19	17.27
	Lower	–	–	7	6.36
	Total	72	100	110	100

2. Political Orientation of Protest Participants

Respondents' self-identified ideology was predominantly progressive across both survey waves. A clear majority identified as progressive (first wave: 71.83%; second wave: 71.82%), followed by moderates (first wave: 18.31%; second wave: 22.73%), while conservatives constituted a small minority (first wave: 9.86%; second wave: 5.45%).

Patterns of current party support indicate that most participants were not formally aligned with any political party. The largest share reported no current party support (first wave: 66.67%; second wave: 54.55%). Among those who expressed a preference, support was concentrated on the Democratic Party of Korea (first wave: 19.44%; second wave: 30.00%). Support for minor progressive parties remained limited but present (Progressive Party: first wave: 5.56%; second wave: 7.27%; Justice Party: first wave: 2.78%; second wave: 0.91%). Support for the People Power Party appeared only in the second wave and was marginal (0.91%). Overall, the participant group consisted primarily of non-partisans, alongside a smaller subset aligned with progressive parties.

To distinguish short-term preference from longer-term partisan attachment, the analysis also considers party identification, which captures a respondent's perceived psychological closeness to a party and reflects a relatively stable affective orientation. In the second wave, party identification was highest for the Democratic Party of Korea (42.73%), followed by independents or non-partisans (34.55%), while identification with the People Power Party was rare (2.73%). Taken together, these findings indicate that although non-partisans constituted a substantial share of participants, partisan attachment—when present—leaned clearly toward progressive parties.

Intergenerational comparison further highlights the distinctiveness of the participants' political profiles. Respondents reported that their fathers' party support most often aligned with the People Power Party (first wave: 34.72%; second wave: 35.45%), exceeding support for the Democratic Party of Korea (first wave: 23.61%; second wave: 23.64%). This pattern is consistent with Daegu's long-standing conservative-dominant political environment and established patterns of intergenerational political socialization in a relatively closed regional context (Kim, 2017). Despite this background, the participants themselves were predominantly progressive in ideology and frequently non-partisan, and when partisan attachment existed it tended to favor progressive parties. In short, despite Daegu's conservative-dominant regional context and the parental generation's tendency to support the People Power Party, these young participants nonetheless took to the streets in support of impeachment.

In the second wave, most respondents reported that their political orientation influenced their decision to participate (80.73%, n = 88), while a smaller share reported no such influence (19.26%, n = 21). Notably, many participants were aware that their political orientations diverged from the local mainstream and that participation could entail social pressure or the risk of isolation. Nevertheless, they chose to take to the streets. In this sense, participation can be interpreted as a proactive entry into the public arena to articulate political voice despite unfavorable local conditions.

Analysis of the open-ended responses further reveals that references to "political orientation" functioned not merely as ideological labels but as internalized motivational justifications that reinforced decisions to participate. One participant explained that identifying as progressive led them to engage more actively in the protests, indicating that ideological orientation served as a direct driver of participation (male, Nam-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave). Another participant noted that although they had previously considered themselves politically neutral, the unfolding events compelled them to participate because they could not support a government they perceived as engaging in outdated and exclusionary politics (female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 20, university student, first wave). Still others emphasized that their participation did not follow a deliberate decision to adopt a particular political stance; rather, their lived experiences and personal backgrounds had gradually shaped a sensitivity to social injustice, making participation feel both necessary and inevitable (female, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that political orientation among participants operated not as a fixed declarative identity but as a normative compass grounded in accumulated life experiences. This compass guided the interpretation of the democratic crisis and translated subjective convictions into collective action. In this sense, political orientation functioned as a key psychological mechanism facilitating participation in the lightstick protests.

3. Political Efficacy of Protest Participants

Political efficacy refers to an individual's perception of the extent to which their political actions can influence political processes (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187). It is commonly distinguished into internal and external dimensions (McPherson & Welch, 1977, pp. 509–521). Internal political efficacy denotes an individual's belief in their capacity to understand politics and to participate effectively (Yeich & Levine, 1994). By contrast, external political efficacy reflects the perception that political authorities and institutions are responsive to citizens' demands (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990, p. 290).

Political efficacy among young participants in the Daegu lightstick protests was relatively high. With respect to internal efficacy, a majority of respondents (53.64%, n = 59) disagreed with the statement that politics and government are too complicated to understand, indicating that most participants did not internalize a sense of cognitive helplessness toward politics. Indicators of external efficacy were even more pronounced. An overwhelming majority rejected the view that voting is the only way for "people like me" to influence government (91.82%, n = 101), and similarly disagreed that an individual vote does not matter because so many people vote (92.73%, n = 102). In addition, 93.64% (n = 103) agreed that which candidate or party they support makes an important difference for the future.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that participants perceived political choice and action as meaningful and potentially consequential. This relatively high level of political efficacy likely functioned as a psychological resource that sustained protest participation, even within Daegu's conservative-dominant regional context where the perceived costs of dissent are comparatively high.

Ⅴ. How Did Participants Engage in the Lightstick Protests?

1. Idol Fandom Culture and Lightsticks

The lightstick protests in Daegu display clear historical continuity with earlier candlelight demonstrations (Ahn, 2025), yet they also diverged in important ways from previous forms of contentious participation. Rather than relying primarily on organizational mobilization led by civic groups or political parties, participation was facilitated through cultural practice. Repertoires that had largely remained within K-pop fandom as modes of cultural consumption were repurposed in the protest arena as instruments of political participation (Choi, 2025).

A defining feature of the protests was the absence of a centralized organization directing mobilization. Instead, individuals converged through loosely connected networks and self-organized their participation, effectively constructing the public square through everyday ties and shared perceptions of political crisis. Cultural repertoires—such as lightsticks, flags, slogans, and hashtag-based practices—functioned as connective devices that substituted for formal organizational structures. Familiar symbols lowered barriers to entry and enabled first-time participants to join with relatively little hesitation. In this respect, the protests illustrate how politically isolated individuals can enter the public sphere through culturally familiar forms and develop shared norms and emotional orientations without centralized coordination (Choi, 2025).

Survey results provide quantitative support for this interpretation. A substantial share of respondents reported prior fandom experience (first wave: 65.28%; second wave: 50.91%). Evaluations of creative modes of participation—including lightsticks and related symbolic practices—were overwhelmingly positive in both waves (first wave: 98.61%, n = 71/72; second wave: 98.16%, n = 107/109). These findings suggest that fandom-based repertoires were widely perceived as legitimate, accessible, and participation-enhancing rather than as trivial or apolitical.

Open-ended responses further illuminate the underlying mechanisms. Participants described lightsticks as symbols for protecting "everyday life" and as tools that transformed the protest atmosphere into something "bright…like a concert" (female, Seo-gu, Daegu, age 27, office worker, first wave; male, Dalseong-gun, Daegu, age 13, middle school student, first wave). Others emphasized accessibility, portraying participation as "an enjoyable festival" rather than a rigid or intimidating space, and noting that "the barriers…are not high" (female, Dalseong-gun, Daegu, age 28, non-regular worker; female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 16, high school student, first wave). Several respondents also highlighted how lightsticks and related symbols fostered a sense of connection and reassurance, making participation feel "not difficult or frightening" (female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 20, university student, first wave).

Taken together, these findings indicate that fandom-based cultural repertoires lowered participation thresholds, reduced psychological costs, and facilitated the coming together of previously fragmented individuals in the Daegu protest arena. By transforming political dissent into a familiar, emotionally accessible practice, lightsticks enabled young people—many of whom were politically isolated within a conservative-dominant regional context—to enter the public sphere and sustain collective action without reliance on formal organizational mobilization.

2. SNS Use and Protest Participation

Participation pathways in the lightstick protests indicate that information flows mediated through social networking services (SNS), combined with spontaneous convergence through loosely connected networks, played a more central role than traditional organizational mobilization by political parties or civic groups. In SNS environments, political information is rapidly consumed and recirculated, and trust is often formed through reputation, visibility, and relational cues embedded in weak-tie networks, rather than through strong organizational cohesion. This communication structure increases the likelihood that online interaction translates into offline collective action, creating favorable conditions for movement from digital communication to street participation (Song, Yim, & Chang, 2016, pp. 154–155). From this perspective, the lightstick protests are better understood as a process in which information, emotions, and interpretive frames circulating through SNS connected individuals and facilitated non-conventional political participation, rather than as a case of organization-led mobilization (Song, Yim, & Chang, 2016, pp. 164–165).

Survey evidence supports this interpretation. In both waves, SNS emerged as the most frequently reported primary source of political information (first wave: 81.94%, n = 59; second wave: 65.45%, n = 72). Other sources—such as television news, portal news sites, YouTube, online communities, and newspapers—accounted for substantially smaller shares. Among respondents who identified SNS as their primary source, platform use was highly concentrated. Twitter (X) dominated in both waves (first wave: 66.10%, n = 39; second wave: 75.00%, n = 54), followed by Instagram (first wave: 23.73%, n = 14; second wave: 27.78%, n = 20).

Open-ended responses further illustrate how SNS functioned as a practical pathway into participation. Participants described routinely encountering protest-related information through platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, noting that repeated exposure in everyday online routines gradually strengthened their willingness to participate as they followed developments surrounding the political crisis and impeachment protests (female, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 15, middle school student, first wave; female, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 24, graduate student, first wave). Several respondents emphasized that on-site images and posts reduced psychological barriers by signaling that protest spaces were neither violent nor unsafe (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 26, job seeker). Others highlighted how real-time articles, posts, and rapid online reactions made political issues feel more accessible and relevant to younger generations (female, Dong-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave). References to protest “reviews,” lightstick photographs, and participation-verification images suggest that SNS operated not only as channels of information transmission but also as platforms that diffused participation norms and affective atmospheres associated with the protests (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 17, high school student, first wave; female, Dalseong-gun, Daegu, age 24, job seeker, first wave).

Consistent with these qualitative accounts, a majority of second-wave respondents reported that their primary political information sources influenced their decision to participate (59.72%, n = 43), while 40.28% (n = 29) reported no such influence. Taken together, these findings indicate that protest participation was closely embedded in participants' SNS-centered everyday information environments, where exposure, emotional resonance, and peer visibility jointly lowered participation thresholds and facilitated the transition from online awareness to offline collective action.

Ⅵ. Why Did They Participate in the Lightstick Protests?

Second-wave results indicate that the most common immediate trigger for participation was the president's declaration of martial law (59.09%, n = 65), followed by dissatisfaction with specific government policies (23.64%, n = 26). Smaller shares of respondents cited concerns about inequality or injustice (7.27%, n = 8), exposure to political information through SNS or YouTube (4.55%, n = 5), and other reasons. Taken together, these findings suggest that participation was driven primarily by an acute democratic shock, while also reflecting accumulated grievances and an SNS-centered information environment that reinforced mobilization.

Open-ended responses further demonstrate that martial law was interpreted less as a conventional policy dispute and more as a fundamental threat to democratic rules and political legitimacy. Participants described the declaration as sudden and fear-inducing, criticized political actors for failing to fulfill their constitutional responsibilities during the crisis, and questioned the procedural and normative legitimacy of invoking martial law (female, Nam-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave; female, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, age 30, office worker, first wave). These perceptions intensified as respondents observed the National Assembly's handling of the situation, including the failure of the initial vote on December 7 and the eventual passage of the impeachment motion on December 14. For some, these developments clarified the severity of the democratic crisis and strengthened their determination to participate in street protests (female, Chilgok-gun, Gyeongbuk, age

21, university student, first wave; female, Dong-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave).

Taken together, the reasons why young people participated in the Daegu lightstick protests cannot be reduced to calls for impeachment triggered solely by the declaration of martial law. While martial law functioned as the decisive catalytic event for many participants, protest participation also drew on preexisting dissatisfaction with government performance, heightened sensitivity to inequality and injustice, and continuous reinforcement through online information flows. The protests are therefore best understood as a form of collective action in which an immediate democratic rupture intersected with longer-term grievances, transforming latent discontent into visible political mobilization.

1. Threats to Democracy and a Sense of Responsibility

Participants in the Daegu lightstick protests overwhelmingly perceived South Korean democracy to be under serious threat. In the first wave, all respondents reported that democracy was under threat (100%, n = 72), and this perception remained dominant in the second wave (92.73%, n = 102). Importantly, participants did not frame this threat as a diffuse or abstract sense of anxiety. Instead, they attributed the crisis to concrete political authority, most notably the executive branch and the president. In both waves, the most frequently cited source of democratic threat was the abuse of power or undemocratic behavior by the executive (first wave: 80.56%, n = 58; second wave: 76.85%, n = 83).

Evaluations of democratic functioning further reinforce this diagnosis. In the first wave, an overwhelming majority (91.67%, n = 66) stated that democracy was not functioning properly. Although negative evaluations remained predominant in the second wave (61.82%, n = 68), a notable share offered conditional or qualified assessments that democracy was functioning to some extent (38.18%, n = 42). Open-ended responses indicate that these evaluations clustered around recurring themes, including presidential overreach, the perceived failure of institutions to reflect public opinion, the confinement of participation to elections, concerns about infringements on basic rights, and perceptions of elite dominance. As one respondent put it, democracy was “not functioning well due to abuse of power and the personal judgment of President Yoon” (female, Seo-gu, Daegu, age 27, office worker). Another emphasized the gap between citizens and decision-makers, noting that “they do whatever they want without listening to the people” (male, Dalseong-gun, Daegu, age 13, middle school student).

Perceptions of democratic threat were accompanied by a strong sense of civic responsibility. Responses to the statement “I feel a sense of responsibility to protect and advance democracy” were overwhelmingly affirmative in both waves (first wave: 100%, n = 72; second wave: 97.27%, n = 107). Qualitative accounts suggest that this sense of responsibility was understood not as a momentary sentiment but as an ongoing civic practice. One participant described doing “everything I can from my position,” including discussing social issues, raising awareness, voting, and participating in rallies and collective statements (female, Dong-gu, Daegu, age 20, university student, first wave). Another explained that casting her first vote prompted her to recognize the broader importance of elections beyond presidential contests and motivated her to participate more proactively in the future (female, Seo-gu, Daegu, age 19, high school student).

Taken together, participants framed the situation not merely as political dissatisfaction but as a crisis of democratic rules and rights. Their protest participation was interpreted as an expression of civic responsibility grounded in concrete experiences of power abuse, political exclusion, and perceived threats to fundamental rights. In this sense, participation in the Daegu lightstick protests represented an effort to actively defend democracy in response to a perceived crisis of the breakdown of democracy.

2. Policy Failures of the Yoon Suk Yeol Government

1) Failure of Economic Policy: Grievances Rooted in Economic Inequality

Across both survey waves, dissatisfaction with the Yoon Suk-yeol administration was most frequently directed at economic policy (first wave: 41.67%, n = 30; second wave: 24.55%, n = 27), indicating that grievances were closely tied to everyday concerns such as livelihoods, employment prospects, and rising living costs. Women's and gender-related policies ranked second in both waves (first wave: 23.61%, n = 17; second wave: 18.18%, n = 20), suggesting that gender equality remained a salient axis of problem awareness. Notably, in the second wave dissatisfaction broadened across multiple policy domains—including foreign policy (15.45%, n = 17), healthcare (14.55%, n = 16), welfare (13.64%, n = 15), and education (12.73%, n = 14). This dispersion indicates that participants' grievances were not confined to a single issue area but reflected a more general assessment of governance performance.

Open-ended responses reveal that dissatisfaction with economic policy stemmed less from abstract evaluations of macroeconomic indicators than from problem awareness centered on redistribution, inequality, rising living costs, and the perceived failure of the state to protect vulnerable groups. One respondent described the administration's economic policy as "only consolidating the position of vested interests" while "actually worsening social welfare," thereby weakening the country's overall capacity (female, Daegu, age 21, university student). Another characterized the situation as "employment down, prices up," experienced as government inaction—"not being controlled and left unattended" (female, Mungyeong-si, Gyeongbuk, age 21, university student). Several respondents framed their dissatisfaction in explicitly distributive terms, arguing that the government "gives handouts or tax cuts to those who already have more," while ordinary citizens bear the burden through increases in electricity and transportation costs. Others pointed to the absence of regulatory and relief measures for risks disproportionately affecting young people—such as cryptocurrency losses and housing lease fraud—linking economic dissatisfaction directly to lived experiences of insecurity in everyday life (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 22, university student). Similar critiques connecting “cuts to welfare budgets for the economically vulnerable” with the “maintenance of vested power” (female, Gaeun-eup, Mungyeong-si, Gyeongbuk, age 21, university student), as well as descriptions of labor policy as “the worst” (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 20, university student), suggest that economic policy dissatisfaction was widely understood as intensifying inequality, weakening social safety nets, and worsening young people’s prospects in employment, housing, and labor markets.

These perceptions of disadvantage are also reflected in structural labor-market indicators. In the first half of 2023, Daegu’s youth employment rate stood at 64.5%, 6.0 percentage points lower than that of the Seoul metropolitan area (70.5%). Within Daegu, the gender gap was substantial, with employment rates of 68.0% for men and 60.7% for women—a difference of 7.3 percentage points. Wage outcomes further underscore this disadvantage: only 34.4% of young wage workers in Daegu earned at least KRW 3 million per month (compared to 47.5% in the metropolitan area), while 65.6% earned below KRW 3 million (vs. 52.5%). Job quality indicators point in the same direction. The share of regular workers was lower (68.9% vs. 72.3%), while temporary and daily employment was higher (19.0% vs. 17.8%). Correspondingly, job satisfaction (30.9%) and income satisfaction (23.7%) lagged behind the metropolitan area by 4.5 and 2.7 percentage points, respectively. Taken together, these indicators suggest that Daegu youth face disadvantages in both the quantity and quality of employment, conditions likely to reinforce perceptions of inequality and intensify dissatisfaction with the government’s economic policy (Dongbuk Regional Statistical Office, 2024).

Policy-related dissatisfaction with the Yoon Suk yeol administration thus emerged as a central background motivation for participation in the lightstick protests. In the first wave, 94.44% of respondents (68 out of 72) reported that dissatisfaction with government policies influenced their decision to participate; a similar pattern appeared in the second wave, with 95.00% (104 out of 110) reporting such influence. Only small minorities indicated that policy dissatisfaction did not affect their participation (first wave: 5.56%, n = 4; second wave: 5.00%, n = 6). These findings suggest that while the declaration of martial law served as the immediate catalyst, participants' decisions to take to the streets were grounded in accumulated frustrations with policy performance, rooted in lived experiences of inequality, insecurity, and perceived governance failure. In this sense, protest participation was shaped not only by a singular democratic shock but by longer-term material and distributive grievances that rendered that shock politically consequential.

2) Failure of Gender Policy

Participants described gender inequality in Daegu not as an abstract policy issue, but as an everyday experience reproduced across workplaces, family life, and the local public sphere. Accounts of workplace experience emphasized wage discrimination and blocked promotion opportunities, including persistent pay gaps and glass-ceiling dynamics (female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 26, job seeker, first wave; female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 27, office worker, first wave). Beyond the workplace, respondents pointed to patriarchal family norms—such as disproportionate caregiving responsibilities placed on eldest daughters and the persistence of son preference—as everyday mechanisms through which gender hierarchy is reproduced (female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 24, university student, first wave; female, Gimcheon-si, Gyeongbuk, age 22, university student, first wave). Some participants further linked gender inequality to issues of safety and dignity, citing experiences of harassment or assault and exclusionary, male-dominated organizational cultures (female, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, age 22, unemployed). Others emphasized that Daegu's local discursive climate constrained the articulation of women's rights through hostility and social pressure toward silence (female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 20, university student, first wave).

Evaluations of the Yoon Suk yeol administration's gender policies were overwhelmingly negative in both survey waves (first wave: 87.50%, n = 63/72; second wave: 92.73%, n = 102/110), while positive or uncertain responses remained marginal. Open-ended responses indicate that these evaluations were framed less as a singular or immediate mobilizing issue than as part of a broader normative assessment of democratic regression and governance failure. Participants frequently interpreted gender policies as symbolizing a retreat from substantive equality and as reinforcing social division rather than addressing structural problems. One respondent criticized the administration for "using gender conflict to win votes and then shifting blame for declining approval ratings onto social divisions," arguing that the government actively fostered an atmosphere of polarization (female, Dong-gu, Daegu, age 19, university student, first wave). Another participant stated that "the pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family itself felt like an act that legitimizes hatred," interpreting the policy not as reform but as a signal of hostility toward gender equality (female, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, age 30, office worker, first wave). Importantly, these accounts suggest that gender inequality was experienced not primarily as a discrete policy grievance motivating protest participation on its own, but as a background normative concern shaping broader perceptions of injustice, democratic backsliding, and institutional irresponsibility. As one respondent explained, "gender conflict only deepens, and policies that claim to address low birth rates end up wasting taxpayers' money or leading to further erosion of women's rights—this goes beyond dissatisfaction and makes me angry" (female, Daegu, age 21, university student, first wave). In this sense, gender inequality functioned as a lens through which participants evaluated state legitimacy and democratic commitment, rather than as the sole or immediate trigger of mobilization.

At the same time, fewer respondents identified gender issues as a direct trigger for protest participation, and this share declined across waves (first wave: 48.61%, n = 35/72; second wave: 33.64%, n = 37/110). Participants more frequently framed their decision to participate around the declaration of martial law, perceived threats to democracy, and accumulated dissatisfaction with overall government performance. Gender inequality, however, remained salient as a background normative concern—shaping evaluations of legitimacy, justice, and state responsibility—even when it did not function as the immediate catalyst for mobilization.

Taken together, these findings suggest that gender inequality operated less as a single-issue mobilizing demand than as a structural condition of everyday life that informed participants' broader judgments about democratic erosion, policy failure, and the legitimacy of political authority.

Ⅶ. What Did They Demand?

Daegu's young participants framed the lightstick protests as a call for transformation in local politics, converting a newly perceived "possibility of change" into a civic demand. Rather than treating Daegu as a fixed conservative space, participants repeatedly emphasized that "Daegu can change" and that "people in Daegu can also change" (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave; female, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, age 25, job seeker, first wave). Participation itself was frequently described as a learning experience that strengthened civic responsibility. One respondent noted that her sense of "responsibility increased" after joining the protests (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave). For others, participation reshaped prior aspirations to exit the region or even the country. A participant who had "really disliked Korea and wanted to leave" explained that "things might change if we act" (female, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, age 23, university student, first wave).

The demand for change was further reinforced through encounters with "people like myself," which dismantled feelings of political isolation (male, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 19, high school student, first wave) and strengthened confidence that transformation depends on the mutual recognition and convergence of dispersed citizens rather than elite intervention (female, Nam-gu, Daegu, age 24, non-regular worker, second wave; female, Dong-gu, Daegu, age 24, regular worker, second wave). Notably, even a self-identified conservative supporter interpreted the protests as an expression of shared anger cutting across ideological lines (female, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, age 25, university student, first wave), suggesting that calls for change resonated as demands for restoring political normalcy rather than as narrowly partisan appeals.

The lightstick protests also functioned as a civic learning space in which participants acquired political efficacy and learned how to articulate collective demands. Some described realizing that even “ordinary” individuals without social status could translate private thoughts into political action (female, Seo-gu, Daegu, age 24, university student, second wave). Others emphasized that acting together reduced the sense of helplessness associated with passively watching political events through screens (female, Nam-gu, Daegu, age 26, job seeker, second wave). Participants frequently identified women and youth as agents of change in Daegu and linked local political transformation to solidarity with socially disadvantaged groups and non-regular workers, framing change as an expansion of representation rather than a simple judgment of the incumbent government (female, Suseong-gu, Daegu, age 27, office worker, first wave; female, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 23, university student, first wave; female, Buk-gu, Daegu, age 21, job seeker).

Respondents’ understanding of “restoration of democracy” further clarifies the normative content of these demands. In both waves, democracy was most often defined in terms of popular sovereignty and individual freedom, with sovereignty ranked first (first wave: 37.50%, n = 27/72; second wave: 32.73%, n = 36/110) and freedom second (first wave: 34.72%, n = 25/72; second wave: 30.00%, n = 33/110). Smaller but meaningful shares emphasized majority representation (first wave: 13.89%, n = 10/72; second wave: 20.91%, n = 23/110), minority rights protection (first wave: 1.39%, n = 1/72; second wave: 7.27%, n = 8/110), social and economic equality (first wave: 12.50%, n = 9/72; second wave: 4.55%, n = 5/110), and checks and balances (second wave: 2.73%, n = 3/110). Taken together, participants articulated a plural conception of democratic restoration combining sovereignty and freedom with representation and institutional restraint.

These understandings were reflected in priorities for political reform. In the second wave, respondents most frequently selected strong legal measures to eliminate corruption and privilege (46.36%, n = 51/110), followed by institutional reforms to enhance transparency and accountability (19.09%, n = 21/110) and the expansion of citizens’ political awareness and participation (13.64%, n = 15/110). Smaller shares emphasized gender equality and the voices of marginalized groups (8.18%, n = 9/110), leadership and moral integrity (5.45%, n = 6/110), and fair electoral systems with expanded participation opportunities (4.55%, n = 5/110). Overall, calls for democratic restoration centered on rebuilding democratic functioning—anti-corruption, accountable governance, and citizen participation—rather than on regime change alone.

Finally, participants' demands extended to an explicit call for expanded political representation. While core participants were young women who tended to identify as progressive or moderate, many also distanced themselves from existing party politics and identified as independents. In the context of Daegu's long-standing single-party dominance, calls for "political change" targeted not only the incumbent administration but also the narrow representational channels available to youth and women in local politics.

Table 3 provides the structural backdrop for this demand. From the 13th to the 22nd National Assembly of South Korea, 83.48% of Daegu's district-level winners were affiliated with the People Power Party and its predecessors (n = 96), compared to 9.57% for the Democratic Party of Korea and its predecessors (n = 11) and 6.96% for other parties and independents (n = 8). Gender imbalance was even more pronounced: 94.78% of elected representatives were men (n = 109), while women accounted for only 5.22% (n = 6), corresponding to just four individual women elected during the period. The average age of representatives was 56.23 years (men: 56.34; women: 54.17). Taken together, Table 3 demonstrates that Daegu's district representation has been structurally concentrated by conservative party and overwhelmingly male, producing cumulative representational imbalances that helpexplain why young participants framed the lightstick protests as a demand that "politics must change."

Table 4 reports second-wave evaluations of how well the National Assembly of South Korea represents respondents, distinguishing between representation by the Assembly as an institution and representation through its policy outputs. A majority of respondents indicated that the National Assembly does not represent them (57.27%,

<Table 3> Status of Elected District Representatives in Daegu From the 13th to the 22nd National Assembly (Author's Compilation)

Category		N	%	Elected Representatives
Party affiliation	People Power Party and its predecessors	96	83.48	–
	Democratic Party and its predecessors	11	9.57	–
	Other parties and independents	8	6.96	–
Gender	Male	109	94.78	–
	Female	6	5.22	4 individuals elected: Park Geun-hye, Kwon Eun-hee, Yang Geum-hee, Lee In-seon
Age (average)	Overall average	56.23		–
	Male average	56.34		–
	Female average	54.17		–

n = 63/110), while fewer than one-quarter reported that it does (23.64%, n = 26/110). Evaluations of policy representation were even more negative. Nearly two-thirds stated that the National Assembly's policies do not represent them (60.91%, n = 67/110), compared to only 17.27% who felt that they do (n = 19/110).

Taken together, these assessments indicate a pronounced representation deficit, encompassing both parliamentary representation at the institutional level and substantive representation through policy outcomes. This perceived gap reinforces participants' broader claims for democratic restoration and expanded political representation, particularly in a regional context characterized by long-standing partisan dominance and limited channels for youth and women's voices.

<Table 4> Evaluation of Parliamentary and Policy Representation (Second Wave)

Category	National Assembly(How well do you think the National Assembly represents you?)		National Assembly Policies (How well do you think the National Assembly represents you with regard to policy?)	
	N	%	N	%
Do not represent	63	57.27	67	60.91
Neutral	21	19.09	24	21.82
Represent	26	23.64	19	17.27
Total	110	100	110	100

In open-ended responses, participants emphasized not simple partisan dislike but a broader perception that the existing party system fails to represent their lives and interests. One respondent, identifying herself as “a worker, a citizen without much money, and a woman,” stated, “I don’t support any party, but I am not conservative,” concluding that “conservative parties do not represent my views” (female, age 21, university student, Gaeun-eup, Mungyeong-si, Gyeongbuk). Another participant noted that prior conservative support did not amount to endorsement of the current administration, arguing that “even conservatives are angry” and warning that conservatism itself could be rejected if current conditions persisted (male, age 25, university student, Gyeongsan-si, Gyeongbuk, first wave).

Such perceptions of representational failure translated into explicit demands for party-system change. Participants called for political parties to “change,” criticized the rigidity of the two-party structure, and demanded “more diverse parties” that could better reflect social plurality (female, age 23, university student, Gimcheon-si, Gyeongbuk, first wave; female, age 22, university student, Gimcheon-si, Gyeongbuk, first wave; male, age 23, Buk-gu, Daegu, first wave). One respondent directly linked two-party dominance to representational exclusion within the National Assembly of South Korea, criticizing it as overwhelmingly composed of men in their forties to sixties and disconnected from younger generations’ experiences (female, age 24, graduate student, Buk-gu, Daegu, first wave). These accounts indicate that dissatisfaction was directed not only at the incumbent government but at the structural limits of partisan representation itself.

VIII. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined participants in the pro-impeachment rallies held in Daegu following the December 3 declaration of martial law—hereafter referred to as the lightstick protests. Drawing on two waves of on-site survey data, the analysis addressed four questions: who the participants were, how they joined, why they mobilized, and what they demanded. By centering participants' experiences, motivations, and claims, the study reconstructed the meaning of participation as it was produced within Daegu's distinctive regional and political context, rather than treating the protests as a uniform national phenomenon.

First, regarding who participated, the protesters were predominantly young, with individuals in their twenties comprising roughly seven-tenths of respondents and women accounting for approximately four-fifths. While students formed the largest group, participants also included job seekers, non-regular workers, and employed youth in both regular and precarious positions. This composition indicates that participation was rooted in ordinary and often insecure life conditions, rather than elite activism. Politically, respondents leaned progressive overall, yet a majority did not identify with any specific party and described themselves as non-partisan. This profile reflects weak partisan attachment among younger cohorts and highlights an intergenerational contrast in which participants frequently perceived their orientations as diverging from their parents' more conservative party preferences.

Second, regarding how they participated, the lightstick protests combined a cultural pathway with a digital pathway. Participants repurposed lightsticks associated with K-pop fandom and introduced them into contentious politics, lowering fear, softening emotional barriers to street participation, and rendering protest more approachable and legitimate. At the same time, mobilization unfolded through social media—particularly X (Twitter) and Instagram—where information circulated in real time and participants were connected not only through logistics but through shared emotions and mutual visibility. Together, these dynamics exemplify connective action, enabling self-mobilization and rapid convergence without reliance on centralized organizational brokerage.

Third, regarding why they mobilized, the immediate trigger was opposition to the declaration of martial law, widely interpreted as an abuse of presidential authority and a direct threat to democracy. Yet motivations extended beyond a single event. Open-ended responses repeatedly expressed a sense of civic responsibility and an unwillingness to remain passive in the face of democratic backsliding. In addition, accumulated dissatisfaction with the administration's policy performance formed a structural background—especially grievances related to economic hardship, inequality, precarious youth life chances, and the perceived retreat in gender equality policy. Gender concerns, in particular, were articulated as lived experiences and normative judgments even when not always framed as the most direct participation trigger, suggesting that multiple grievances were condensed through the martial law moment into collective action to defend democratic rules.

Fourth, regarding what participants demanded, claims went beyond support for impeachment and converged on the restoration of democracy. Respondents emphasized halting abuses of power, restoring fundamental rights and procedural norms, and rebuilding accountable governance—demands reflected in strong support for anti-corruption measures, transparency, and political responsibility. At the same time, participants articulated calls for expanded political representation. They evaluated Daegu's long-standing representational structure as heavily skewed—characterized by conservative party dominance and male-centered representation—and frequently reported that the National Assembly does not represent people like them. Accordingly, they called for reforms that would enable more diverse representation beyond a rigid two-party order, so that youth, women, and socially marginalized groups could be meaningfully incorporated into institutional politics. These findings point to clear policy implications. In regional contexts such as Daegu, where long-term single-party dominance has constrained representational diversity, institutional reforms are needed to expand political representation and responsiveness. This study suggests that reforms to the electoral system and the institutionalization of regional parties could serve as concrete policy measures to better reflect diverse social interests and to reconnect local citizens with democratic institutions.

The findings of this study show that, even within the challenging political terrain of Daegu, young people took to the streets to defend democracy and articulate their political grievances. However, if such demands continue to remain institutionally unrepresented and systematically excluded, they risk reinforcing populist sentiments and affective polarization rooted in the perception that established politics no longer speaks for them. In this sense, the Daegu case highlights a broader challenge for liberal democracies in an era of democratic crisis: whether and how democratic institutions can respond to grassroots demands before they are redirected into exclusionary or anti-systemic forms of mobilization.

Taken together, the lightstick protests in Daegu can be understood as a form of civic participation in a least-likely regional context, in which young citizens—prompted by the martial law declaration—translated a perceived democratic crisis and accumulated policy dissatisfaction into collective action, while articulating concrete demands for democratic restoration and broader representation. The study is limited by the constraints of on-site survey research, including issues of sample representativeness and the fact that the two survey waves did not track the same individuals. Future research should therefore pursue comparative regional designs, incorporate in-depth qualitative interviews, and examine online diffusion processes more closely in order to clarify how everyday experiences and structural grievances are transformed into moments of political participation.

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