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**Rethinking Mediated Political Engagement: Social Media Ambivalence and
Disconnective Practices of Politically Active Youths in Hong Kong**

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Abstract

Social media have been widely credited for facilitating young people's political engagement, most notably by providing a conducive platform for political expression. There has been comparatively little attention, however, to the possible pitfalls for young people in engaging with politics on social media. In this study, we seek to readdress the overemphasis on the strengths and connectivity of social media by attending to how young people negotiate its drawbacks and disconnectivity. Through in-depth interviews with young participants of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, we examine the choices and motives around mediated (non-)participation among a group of politically active youths. Our findings highlight these young people's social media ambivalence emerging from a major participatory experience. Despite their active and open informational sharing and political expressions on social media alongside their in-person participation during the eventful protest, many young participants became wary of such expressive use owing to their perceptions of de-energization, disconnectedness, and disembodiment. Rather than completely withdraw from political activities on social media, we illustrate how these politically inclined and technologically savvy youths embrace "disconnective practices"—passive engagement (lurking), selective expression (moderation and exposure-limitation), and offline participation (embodied collective action)—to avoid the overwhelming, fractious, and inauthentic conditions of mediated participation.

Keywords: social media; media ambivalence; disconnection; political participation; youth; Hong Kong

Rethinking Mediated Political Engagement: Social Media Ambivalence and Disconnective Practices of Politically Active Youths in Hong Kong

The resurgence of youth involvement in mass protests since the turn of 2010's (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015) has fueled interest in the impact of social media on the political engagement of "the networked young citizen" (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014, p. 143). This line of research, however, has been disproportionately centered on the strengths of social media in providing alternative and empowering spaces for political engagement (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015) with little attention to the drawbacks of engaging with politics through these platforms (Ekström, 2016). In addition, current literature on the dynamics between social media and social movements has mostly focused on the connective action enabled by media technologies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) while neglecting activists' disconnection and deliberate non-usage of technology (Kaun & Treré, 2018).

In this study, we address the lack of attention in current literature to young people's deliberate disengagement and active non-participation with politics on social media. Through in-depth interviews with 20 politically active youths in Hong Kong, who took part in a large-scale civil disobedience protest offline but eschew political talk online, we examine why they disengage with politics on social media and how they make social media work for them. Focusing on their disengagement enables us to flesh out not only the pitfalls of mediated participation but also the shifting and increasingly challenging sociopolitical climate for political engagement in contemporary media environments. We further contribute to extant scholarship and debates on the dynamics of youth political participation vis-à-vis social media by highlighting the ambivalent relationships that young people have with politics online arising from their relational, practical, and experiential concerns.

Social Media and Youth Political Participation

Social media have emerged as a major channel for civic engagement and political participation in recent years. Skoric, Zhu, Goh and Pang (2016) outline three primary uses of social media for civic engagement and political participation: informational use (seeking, gathering, and sharing information through social media, including news, community information, and campaign information), expressive use (expressing oneself and articulating one's opinions, ideas, and thoughts through social media), and relational use (initiating, maintaining, and strengthening relationships with others through social media). Studies have shown that informational and expressive uses of social media, are significant predictors of offline political participation not only in Western democracies (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014) but also in different Asian political systems (Chen, Chan, & Lee, 2016); notably, the moderately strong relationship between expressive use of social media and political participation in Confucian societies (Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016).

Social media have the potential to facilitate political participation among young people in several ways. Firstly, it helps to reduce the entry barriers for young people to engage with politics by making it easy for them to access and communicate political information through social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook (Diani, 2000; Leizerov, 2000; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Secondly, as young people tend to be more technologically savvy and adept at using social media in their mobilization and empowerment, such use quickens (accelerates and intensifies) political participation among them (Sloam, 2014). Thirdly, from online petitions to viral videos and politically motivated hacking, social media offer new opportunities for young people to engage with politics, which are distinct from offline actions (Christensen, 2011). Finally, by offering an efficient means to mobilize and gain visibility, social media facilitate a paradigm shift from “collective action” to “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), making the availability of organizational resources—which disadvantages younger participants—less vital (Loader et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, the impact of social media on young people's engagement with politics has been the subject of much debate. The expediency of online engagement has prompted labels such as "slacktivists" (Christensen, 2011) and skepticism about whether online actions lead to an improvement in the quality and efficacy of political participation (Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009). Scholars have also questioned whether social media expand the pool of politically engaged youths or merely provide already-engaged youths with a new forum for political participation (Keating & Melis, 2017). Perhaps the most significant concern is whether online participation leads to offline participation. Although political activities on social media can catalyze offline political actions (Harlow, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), some scholars argue that online action does not necessarily cause offline action (Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009). Papacharissi (2016) contends that voicing out on social media facilitate "affective publics" or feelings of engagement that may contribute to the mobilization of networked publics but the process takes time and does not guarantee collective action or impact.

Across these debates, it appears that scholars generally have taken for granted that social media facilitate young people's political expressions online. Yet, for some young people, talking about politics on social media is problematic and risky. Young people may be reluctant to express political opinions on social media because what they say online can be used by others in unfavorable ways (Ekström, 2016). Moreover, talking about politics among one's social network may be controversial and could have social repercussions (Chan, 2018; Ekström, 2016; Sveningsson, 2014). Such drawbacks and the concomitant disengagement with politics on social media have remained largely neglected in the current literature.

Conceptualizing Social Media Disconnectivity

Unlike earlier research on digital non-participation which was primarily concerned about exclusion owing to a lack of access, means, or acceptance (i.e. have-nots, technophobes, and

innovation laggards), the nascent field of disconnection studies or scholarship on non-participation of media technologies converges on a growing unease with the instantaneous, perpetual, and ubiquitous forms of networked connectivity that permeate our everyday lives and environments (Casemajor, Couture, Delfin, Goerzen, & Delfanti, 2015; Hesselberth, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2018; Light, 2014). Disconnection scholarship challenges dominant perspectives in current literature that champion the emancipatory potential of mass online connectivity (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) by highlighting its detrimental and exploitative dimensions such as commercialization (McChesney, 2013) and surveillance (Marwick, 2012). This scholarship further disputes the celebratory view of mediated participation as something inherently desirable while non-participation is construed as nonchalant, apathetic, passive, and powerless (Casemajor et al., 2015). Disconnection studies contend that people's deliberate disengagement from mediated participation represents tactics in negotiating an increasingly challenging digital media ecology (Light, 2014) and pushbacks against the encroachment of media technologies on our way of life (Morrison & Gomez, 2014).

In the political context, scholars have argued that disconnection reflects conscious political choices and constitutes a site of struggle between activists and their adversaries (Kaun & Treré, 2018). The types of political disconnection discussed (Hesselberth, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2018) include system-wide practices, namely *media repression* (disconnection imposed by a state actor to undermine dissent such as blocking access or shutting down services) and *media disruption* (subversive actions undertaken by individuals or groups such as hacking or distributed denial of service attacks)—which are beyond the scope of this study. This literature has also highlighted *media refusal* which encompasses complete disconnection (e.g., Facebook suicide machine) and total abstinence as a form of lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). However, it is often infeasible or undesirable for users to permanently opt-out or fully withdraw from all social media or major SNS. According to

Light (2014), social media users need to involve disconnection to a certain extent to stay connected with the users whom they deemed important on SNS. Rather than disconnect completely, he contends that users would apply their own “disconnective practices” when maintaining their connections on SNS. The focus of this study is on such cases of *media ambivalence* whereby users recognize both the promises and pitfalls of media technologies and disconnection practices take the form of micro-resistance or small scale preferences (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015) to negotiate one’s mediated experience.

Drawing on prior literature (Hesselberth, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2018; Light, 2014), we conceptualize disconnective practices as tactics to avoid, disrupt, or circumvent conditions that enable certain forms of mediated participation to be undesirable or exploitative. Previous studies have explored such disconnective practices, for example, of employees in dealing with online profiling (McDonald, Thompson, & O’Connor, 2016) and those of gay men in using mobile dating apps (Cassidy, 2016). For this study, we apply the concept to examine how a group of politically active young people appropriate social media for political purposes while shielding themselves from the attendant drawbacks. We also investigate their motives and choices of disconnection and non-use strategies vis-à-vis offline participation to further illuminate the media ambivalences and sociopolitical conditions that shape their mediated (non-)participation.

Research Context: Young Participants of The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong

Young people’s participation in the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong provided an appropriate research context to examine the relationship between online and offline participation for several reasons. Young people were key participants of this mass demonstration (a.k.a. Occupy Central) in Hong Kong. According to an onsite survey conducted in two of the occupied areas during the movement, nearly 50% of the 569 participants were aged 25 or below and 19% were current university students (F. L. F. Lee &

Chan, 2016). These young participants were adept in using social media and other enabler technologies to initiate, organize and coordinate their actions (Y. L. Lee & Ting, 2015). Attesting to Hong Kong's mass digital networked connectivity, 88.6 % of its residents aged 10 or above owns a smartphone (Census and Statistics Department, 2018) while nearly 80% of the general population were active social media users (Statista, 2018). Social media applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp were utilized in the Umbrella Movement and served as platforms for protesters and other young people to distribute information and share opinions (P. S. N. Lee, So, & Leung, 2015). Citizens' engagement in online political activities has been linked with the depth of their involvement in the Umbrella Movement (F. L. F. Lee & Chan, 2016). Participants who engaged in digital media activities frequently would spend more time in the occupied areas and be more likely to have mobilized others to participate and were more active in the movement. Nevertheless, as argued in this study, neither the use of social media for political purposes nor the relationship between online and offline actions is a straightforward process.

Method

The data in this study are based on individual semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face between February 2016 and January 2017 with 20 local youths in Hong Kong, comprising 10 women and 10 men aged 19 to 25 with a mean age of 21.9 years. Among them, 65 % were current university students at the time of interview and the rest were university graduates. This study was designed to examine a sample of politically active young people to better understand their social media use in relation to their offline participation. Ethical approval was received from the authors' institutional review board before the commencement of the study. The eligibility criteria for respondents are Hong Kong residents, age 25 or younger, had physically participated in collective action, and have used social media for political purposes (i.e., informational, expressive, or relational use). Respondents

were recruited through snowball sampling via social media or word-of-mouth referrals. While all interviewees were participants of the Umbrella Movement, they ranged from first-time demonstrators to experienced rank-and-file activists. To ensure confidentiality, respondents are only referred to in this paper by their pseudonym, gender, and age (at the time of interview).

Using the Umbrella Movement as a common reference point, respondents were asked about why they took part in the event, why they did what they did, and the role of social media in their political engagement. Given the possible selective recall and memory lapse in retrospective interviews, we acknowledge that respondents' accounts represent their subjective reflexivity rather than accurate representations of their experience and rationale during the event. In addition, we recognize the limitation of focusing on university students and graduates. Young people without a college degree that usually come from working class families might hold different political opinions.

Data analysis followed the approach of theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which proceeded from coding similar data elements based on the interview guide to exploring relationships among the codes and identifying the most significant and encompassing themes as informed by the following research questions:

1. What are the salient social media disconnective practices related to these young people's political and civic engagement?
2. What underlies their decisions to engage or disengage in political expressions on social media?

Findings

De-energization and the shift to passive engagement

Consistent with prior research pointing to the intertwine between digital media activities and protest participation during the Umbrella Movement (F. L. F. Lee & Chan, 2016), nearly all

respondents reported high levels of social media informational exchange and expressive use accompanying their in-person participation. But despite their active social media engagement during the movement—or perhaps because of it—respondents became de-energized and shifted to a more passive mode of engagement afterward. Many respondents claim to become lurkers or passive users who merely read political information but not post or comment on anything related to politics, or infrequently sharing information they perceived to be significant. Beyond the ebb and flow of social media activities corresponding to the cycles of escalation and de-escalation in protest campaigns (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011), we argue that young people’s personal experiences during the eventful protest (della Porta, 2018) shaped their attitudes toward informational sharing and subsequent levels of online engagement. They not only became unmotivated to keep up with the same level of engagement but also grew disenchanted with social media informational sharing.

Based on their personal experience, respondents generally believe that information sharing on social media catalyzed the mobilization of protesters and facilitated the collaborative coordination of protest activities. According to Chung (Male, 23), who claims that social media played a very significant role in the Umbrella Movement:

People nowadays don’t watch TV. Moreover, it is a tool of the regime. Social media is different. Because the government can’t control what we people post online. If people are willing to share, there’ll be an audience. That’s why we have a more rounded view of things nowadays. On social media, we’re able to share what we witnessed firsthand when the police fired the tear gas, which can be quite emotive and motivate more people to heed our call to action.

Attesting to the increased visibility and rapid dissemination of information on social media, Oscar (Male, 24) believes that social media not only accelerated information exchange among protesters but the entire movement itself:

In the past, the development of a movement might take days, as it required newspapers and other mass media reporting it. But nowadays, all you need is a status update and a photo, and soon there'll be online media reporting it, which is much faster than the mainstream media ... If there were no social media during the Umbrella Movement...it'd be hard to mobilize so many people in such a short period.

During the movement, many respondents were active in sharing not only news but also their personally sourced information. For instance, Ming (Male, 22) recalls that “during the recapturing of Mongkok on November 20, whenever I saw the police, I would post their precise location on Facebook to warn others.” Several respondents lauded such informational sharing on social media for enabling more efficient coordination among protesters to help sustain the occupation. Kit (Male, 23) spoke of his experience in using Facebook and WhatsApp during the movement to exchange information about the situation in the occupied sites such as by alerting protesters about police deployment or counter-protesters. He recalled that protesters would regularly update Facebook pages to crowdsource supplies (food, water, etc.) and deploy reinforcements to occupied areas with inadequate occupiers.

After the occupied sites were cleared out, the energy driving the intense social media activities inevitably waned. Besides losing the immediate personal relevance that it once held during one's participation in the movement, information sharing on social media neither garners the same level of attention nor feels as satisfactory as before. As Ming explains:

Obviously, I share because I hope that others will validate my views—otherwise why bother sharing something I disagree with. But it's not purely to disseminate information, there's also a personal motive. If you don't get a good response, there's not much drive [to share] ... I do not share as frequently nowadays, maybe just 2-3 posts per month and mostly on Facebook. The stuff I share did not receive many likes though. But I did share much more back in Umbrella Movement, my “concern group”

Facebook page was quite active then—it had 600-700 likes, so I felt that there was an audience for my information. So now if I come across something, I'd just like it myself but not share it as I feel that it might not receive many likes.

Ming's account suggests that these young people's social media participatory experience during the Umbrella Movement implicitly sets an unusually high benchmark of participation (significance, responsiveness, etc.) that renders subsequent experiences less satisfying.

Faced with increased politicization after the Umbrella Movement, several respondents exhibited signs of activist burnout and grew disenchanted with informational exchange on social media. Kit describes himself as being exposed to political information on Facebook daily and suggests that the excessive amount of information is overwhelming:

I'm exposed to political information every day, more than five times daily. Because if you "liked" those news pages [during the movement], they'll keep showing different news [on Facebook]. Nine out of ten news would be related to politics nowadays, and I do not know why. I, in fact, have the feeling of information fatigue sometimes, which would not happen in the past [before the movement]. Previously, out of every ten news maybe only 5-6 are related to politics while the rest could be entertainment or some soft news. But now it seems overwhelmingly [political].

The intense pace of information sharing on social media, which respondents had praised for catalyzing the movement, now feels tiring for these previously active participants. Wai (Male, 25), who has stopped sharing political news and information on Facebook, suggests that the abundance of information on social media makes his sharing pointless:

I think it is hard to spread and share what I wanted to express on social media. As I mentioned, the amount of information is enormous on the Internet and social media, the single post that I share might not be seen by anyone. Even if someone seen it,

there are maybe lots of news reports on the same issue, which would overshadow my post.

Similarly, Karen (Female 22) suggests that sharing political news would not make any difference, as those who are involved in politics would have already been exposed to the news given the explosion of information on social media, whereas those who have no interest in politics would not bother to read what she shares. As a result, she has become less active in sharing political news online, preferring instead to simply read the posts from the relevant pages on Facebook and like those that she thinks are significant.

Disconnectedness and the turn to selective expression

Another salient aspect of young people's disengagement with mediated participation centers around their perceived disconnectedness of political talk on social media. Respondents point to an increasingly polarized and fractious sociopolitical climate emerging from the Umbrella Movement, which becomes amplified in social media. In contrast to their active and open political expressions on social media during the movement, many young participants say that they have since become more selective in posting and commenting on political matters online to avoid meaningless quarrels and social conflicts.

Many respondents claim that one of their motives for actively engaging in articulations, debates, and explanatory activities on social media during the movement was to garner support for their political views and actions. Most respondents agree that such expressive use was effective in galvanizing sympathizers and fence-sitters into action at the onset of the movement. As Karen explains, "Perhaps you weren't planning to join in. However, you saw everyone talking about [the incident] on Facebook—the flurry of photos and expressions of outrage [at the police action]—it'll impel you to go out there." But as people make up their minds for or against the civil disobedience campaign, political talk online not only becomes less effective in winning over more supporters, it is also amplifying

the divisions among friends and the pro-democracy camp. Alluding to her ambivalence with social media expressive use, Karen asserts that:

Social media can band people together but, conversely, it can be quite divisive...

Because everyone can freely express any opinion [on social media], people's viewpoints began to diverge toward the end of the movement. When you say one thing while I say another, it brings out the different factions and opinions [within movement participants].

Rachel (Female, 22) recalls that social media activities during the movement made her realize that many of her friends are not necessarily on the same page as her:

During the Umbrella Movement, some people posted comments such as "Even if the police is wrong, you shouldn't fight back." I argued with them back then, but I started to discover that it is not possible to change others' political views and beliefs overnight, unless something extremely important or ridiculous happens.

Although Rachel reports that she does not care whether what she posts on social media receive the endorsement of other users, she is nonetheless weary of being drawn into bickering or meaningless debates with people in her online network who do not share her political views.

While scholars have commended the role of social media as a more encouraging and secure podium for expressing opposing views than face-to-face interactions (Vromen et al., 2015), several respondents lament that this affordance have engendered fractious exchanges between users with divergent views. Against an increasingly polarized sociopolitical environment in the later part and aftermath of the movement, our respondents learnt that it was nearly impossible to convince others and change their political stance by engaging with them online. As Wai asserts, "Discussing with others with a different political stance and replying their comments is a waste of time as there will be no change on both sides but only

building hatred.” Claiming that mediated communication is not as well-rounded as face-to-face communication and easily leads to misunderstandings, he observes that “people seem to talk across each other online and nothing comes out of it, it feels more like a quarrel.” Rather than facilitating meaningful interactions or political knowledge exchange, our participants believe that discussing politics online would more likely be fueling arguments and animosities. Emily (Female, 25) asserts that political disagreements on social media could easily degenerate into personal attacks or insults against those from the opposing camp: “People would be targeted by those who oppose their political views. These users would use insulting words to abuse those they targeted verbally. It often happens.” Echoing this observation, Kit contends that people tend to be more unbridled in their comments on social media and would not engage in debates when there are no consequences to whatever they say: “You see those people who are opposed to Occupy Central, they leave nasty comments with swear words [on Facebook]. When you click into their profiles, you’ll see nothing but an empty shell—no information, at most just a cover photo.”

Recognizing that social media are not an ideal public sphere, these politically inclined youths would adopt some disconnective practice vis-à-vis the polarizing and fractious political talk on social media. While these practices include abstaining from expressive use, they more commonly entail selective expression—principally, moderation or exposure-limitation—which enables users to continue expressing themselves while avoiding direct confrontation with other users with a different political stance. A key differential in these young people’s social media expressive use is the extent to which they are exposed to political homophily or similarity of political views within their online personal networks.

Although political participation is a personal decision, a few respondents suggest that one ought to consider the feelings and reactions of the other users within their personal networks and therefore exercise moderation in making political comments online. As Kit

asserts:

I think when you are leaving a comment online, you must be careful, as many others can read what you write. Not only your friends, but your relatives, teachers, and lots of people who have various relationships with you. You must try not to affect those people ... When you express your opinion, you'd not want to destroy the harmony of the relationships you have.

He went on to discuss his attempts at self-restraint by refraining from posting nasty comments or including foul language in the posts expressing his political opinion as he feels that such invective may be construed as indirectly scolding others in his personal network who support the opposing side. Similarly, Eric (Male, 25) would moderate his expressive use by only posting about significant events:

Because I have all sorts of friends on my Facebook, I'm a bit wary [about what I share]. So, I'll only share the important stuff, just simply to inform my friends, let everyone know what's happening, no other considerations. But if you're lazy to even share a post, then don't talk about wanting to fight for democracy.

Meanwhile, some participants have no qualms with freely expressing themselves on social media—fully aware that their exposure is only limited to likeminded individuals. For example, Chung claims:

Normally I would share my own or someone else's view that I agree with on social media. My aim is to let others understand my perspective. But honestly, my friends are mainly young people so what I share is only among our circle of yellow ribbons (i.e. Umbrella Movement supporters).

Politically homophilous networks, however, may foster an echo chamber. According to Chan (2018), the fear of social isolation engenders a willingness to self-censor when there is a perceived political disagreement within homophilous peer networks. Conversely, Cherry's

(Female, 22) account demonstrates that participants tend to express only views that are acceptable to the group:

Because on Facebook or other social media, “share” and “like” indicate approval. If I know that people in my network would like a certain idea, then I will share it and discuss with others on my own page.

This tendency is especially salient among those who prize social validation for their views from their peers. Such echo chambers stem from selective avoidance whereby users filter out unwanted information or undesirable dissonant views and disconnect with contacts who disseminate such content (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). Exemplifying this online ideological segregation is Wing (Female, 24), who claimed to be a member of Hong Kong Indigenous (本土民主前線), a radical, localist and nativist political group formed after the Umbrella Movement:

When I think that someone is really nonsense, I’ll “hide all”, that is I won’t see anything from that person. If I see a Facebook friend say the police is excellent at hitting [protesters], I’ll “unfriend” him/her. I won’t want to have any contact with him/her. So, the first step will be blocking all those things I do not want to see. Cos I seldom would encounter opposing or different opinions, if I ever encounter one, I might give it a “like” to indicate “seen” but I won’t bother commenting—the bickering, it’s a waste of time.

However, complete segregation may not be feasible or desirable for many users. Instead, some respondents would limit public exposure to their expressions or restrict their posts to selected audiences within their heterophilous network. As Karen explains, “I’ll limit the more emotive posts to just viewable by my friends on Facebook. Or perhaps, I’ll delete the post after a while or change my privacy settings so that it’s not publicly displayed.”

Disembodiment and the affinity for offline participation

In the previous sections, we have examined young people's ambivalences toward the opportunities of online connective action enabled by social media versus the drawbacks of mediated political participation. Our understanding of disconnection, however, would be incomplete without also accounting for young people's affinity for offline collective action, particularly their preference for embodied over disembodied participation as a form of performance (cf. Kaun & Treré, 2018). To be sure, social media activities without requiring one's physical presence at a given locale represent an ideal mode of participation for young people who have shifted to passive engagement. But for those who persist in active participation, mediated actions are perceived as an inferior substitute for actions undertaken in person.

Respondents who prefer non-mediated participation argue that offline collective actions enable them to directly voice out to the authorities and compel them to respond and plausibly bring about actual changes when there are sufficiently large numbers of protesters. Many respondents believe that physical numbers are far more important for political claim-making than online hits. They claim that with more protesters attending in person, there will be greater bargaining power. To these respondents, participating in offline political actions represent an impactful effort unlike online actions, which are easy for the authorities to ignore. As such, they rather devote their time and effort on participating in offline, collective actions than discussing politics on social media.

Beyond the perceived efficacy of physical numbers, several respondents express an affinity for embodied participation as it offers a sense of authenticity through one's physical performance. As Jordan (1998) contends, "To engage in direct action you have to feel enough passion to put your values into practice: it is literally embodying your feelings, performing your politics." Eric asserts that some young people might not even have enough political and civic understanding before they participate in the movement personally:

During the occupy movement, students could be turning up merely to support other students. Maybe they saw the police firing tear gas and decide “oh I should go there to help.” But if you ask me, I took to the streets because I seek to overturn the 8/31 Framework and show the government that Hong Kong people’s desire for universal suffrage is so strong that we’ll not hesitate to occupy the roads.

Nevertheless, he believes that by being physically present, young people can learn more, not only about political knowledge and information but also the government’s reaction toward citizens’ actions. He further suggests that physical participation provides insights for young people to decide their future political participation and the use of radical actions. Echoing this view, Karen expresses a sense of self-realization engendered via embodied participation, leading her to a completely different understanding of politics and civil disobedience than that conveyed by the media:

Being there in person was what really changed my views. Despite encountering many different opinions online, my thinking was only altered after I personally took part in the Umbrella Movement. What you witness with your eyes or experience with your body is the most striking, the authentic experience is ten times more influential than any article or blog on the Internet... I didn’t understand politics when I was in secondary school, I’ll watch TVB news, unsure about universal suffrage, the current political system, or whether the news reports are bias. When I saw the Chief Executive condemn the violent demonstrators, I’ll feel that it’s not right, why use violence to make a stand? But after I experienced it for myself in person, I came to understand what civil disobedience really entails, why we must make a stand, and what are we standing up for.

Scholars have suggested that non-routinized offline protests are emotively potent, and these feelings may be experienced as personally transformative (Routledge & Simons, 1995).

We further argue that as protesters use their bodies to confront fluid situations with high levels of risk and uncertainty, they can experience intense sensations of empowerment, ineffability, and hyperreality (feeling more real than everyday life), which enable them to discover their unrealized corporeal potentials (cf. Lyng, 1990). Recounting one such experience at the start of the Umbrella Movement, Wing describes the emotional roller-coaster ride from initially feeling extremely terrified, to an adrenaline rush as she conquers her fear, and a sense of omnipotence at the end:

I remember freaking out at the beginning when I was hit by the pepper spray, then suddenly they fired the tear gas. I was with a group of friends and we were so scared we almost cried. I felt so terrified, at that moment I thought maybe I'll die here today, especially since sources say they pulled out their guns. But I decided to stay put because I feel that a Hong Kong where tear gas would be fired on students wouldn't be the Hong Kong that I know. That's why at that point I was already less afraid. After the tear gas the police brought out their batons and hit anyone on sight, kept hitting every protester until the person lie down on the ground. I witnessed the brutality as many people shielded me from the batons seeing my small build. Given that we were breaking the law, I would have little legal recourse even if they killed me. I was frightened, for sure, but after that night, I was more confident that I could afford to give a lot more. I really have the Hong Kong government to thank for "cultivating" me to the point that I'm not even afraid to die.

As Wing's account demonstrates, offline collective actions have the unique potential to provide an unsurpassable level of "emotional achievement" or "self-validating emotional experiences and expressions through active and creative pursuits" (Yang, 2000, p. 596) that are ordinarily absent in our everyday lives.

Conclusions

Contributing to a better understanding of media ambivalence as a dynamic process, this study explicates how young people's attitudes and subsequent use of social media for political purposes become shaped by a major participatory experience. Our findings capture a slice of Hong Kong youths' experiential insights and transformed beliefs about political actions vis-à-vis social media following their personal involvement in a critical redefining event (F. L. F. Lee & Chan, 2018). These young people were politically inclined and adept at using social media. Rather than signaling emerging political apathy or technology non-acceptance, their disconnection with social media represents both a response to the changing circumstances and an outcome of learning from the Umbrella Movement. While our respondents embrace the use of social media in mobilizing and coordinating protest activities, they also express misgivings about the informational and expressive use of social media during and after the eventful protest. This media ambivalence and the concomitant disconnection with politics online further speak to the shifting sociopolitical conditions—increasing politicization, polarization, and radicalization—in Hong Kong that intervene in the mediated participatory landscape post-Umbrella Movement.

This study challenges the dominant perspective in existing literature of social media use as bringing about personalized, connective, more expressive political participation among youth (Vromen et al., 2015) in two major ways. Firstly, we highlight not just the drawbacks of connective action that disincentivize political expressions but also the potential disconnectivity of social media expressive use in amplifying divisions and facilitating fractious exchanges. Similar to Ekström (2016), some respondents eschew political talk on social media as it easily triggers arguments and confrontations with other users owing to differences in political views. Nonetheless, our respondents were not only worried about the consequences of expressive use to themselves but also concerned that their expressive use of social media would cause disharmony with people whom they value but hold opposing

political views. Our findings reveal that young people eschew sharing political news or discussing politics online not only to avoid social conflict, they were also overwhelmed by the fast pace of informational exchange, which makes them feel that it is not making an actual impact. To some respondents, given that social media platforms are already providing an excessive amount of political information and news, sharing political news and information, or discussing politics on social media would be pointless. Moreover, they feel that social media users who are enthusiastic about politics would have learnt about such news and information before they share it. Furthermore, given the polarized and fractious sociopolitical environment after the Umbrella Movement, they recognize that other individuals, especially detractors, would not easily change their minds just because of what they share or express on social media.

Secondly, we demonstrate the continued significance of collective actions for young people and their preference for offline participation over online participation. Although expressing political views online is ostensibly easier than physically attending a protest, as individuals are not bound by time and space, our young respondents expressed an affinity and greater willingness for offline political actions compared with discussing politics on social media. Our respondents believe that physical presence is important for political claim-making: with more protesters, there will be greater bargaining power. They can directly voice out to the authorities and compel them to respond and even effect actual changes when there are sufficiently large numbers of protesters. To them, participating in offline political actions can lead to actual changes and greater impact unlike online actions. More significantly, we highlight these politically inclined youths' affinity for offline collective action and the distinctive performative opportunities provided by embodied participation. Taken together, these young people claim that they would rather spend their time and effort on participating in offline, collective actions instead of discussing politics on social media.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of collective and connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), this study contributes to an emergent but growing stream of disconnection studies (Kaun & Treré, 2018), which seek to readdress the overemphasis on the strengths and connectivity of social media (Hesselberth, 2018) by giving greater attention to how people negotiate its drawbacks and disconnectivity (Light, 2014). Extending this line of research in the political context, we offer a broader discussion and greater understanding of how young people make social media work for them when engaging or disengaging with politics through the concept of disconnective practice. Conceptualizing disconnective practices as tactics to avoid, disrupt, or circumvent conditions that enable certain forms of mediated participation to be undesirable or exploitative, we demonstrate how a group of politically active young people turn to various non-mutually exclusive disconnective practices to appropriate social media for political purposes while shielding themselves from the attendant pitfalls. Although disconnective practices may help young people to avoid certain drawbacks of mediated participation, they are not without problems: the switch to passive engagement could engender political apathy in the longer term, the turn to selective expression has the potential to breed echo chambers and groupthink, and the affinity for offline participation as a performance may encourage more radical physical actions. Future studies should examine the influences of such disconnective practices on young people's political attitudes such as trust in authorities and their intentions to engage in protest movements and other political actions. The findings in this study can also be extended by a comparative study of older people's disconnective practices to explore if various age groups perceive the drawbacks of using social media for political purposes differently and adopt unique forms of disengagement.

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