

## **Social Media and Protest Attitudes During Movement Abeyance: A Study of Hong Kong University Students**

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Much research in the past decade has illustrated the role of social media in protest mobilization and coordination, but few have examined whether and how social media facilitated movement continuity after the end of a protest cycle. This study contributes to knowledge about this research gap by examining levels of social media use and how social media use relates to protest attitudes—persistence, pessimism, and radicalism—among young people during movement abeyance. Analyzing a survey of university students in Hong Kong in March 2019, several months before the onset of the antiextradition bill protests, the findings show that political use of social media related to how young people evaluate the Umbrella Movement, the previous peak of mobilization in the city. Both social media use and evaluation of the Umbrella Movement shaped people’s protest attitudes. Overall, the findings suggest that social media help maintain protest potential even at a time when social mobilization is generally weak.

*Keywords: social media, attitude toward protest, persistence, radicalism, movement abeyance, Hong Kong*

Political communication researchers have spent much effort in the past decade to understand the role of digital and social media in protest movements. Research has continued to provide ample evidence on the positive relationship between social media use and individual-level protest participation (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæck, 2013; Hsiao, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). Social media also serve as a platform for resource mobilization and action coordination (e.g., Bakardjieva, Felt, & Dumitrica, 2018; Mico & Casero-Ripolles, 2014; Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018). Others have examined how digital and social media have facilitated the emergence of new forms or “logics” of more decentralized protests (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Lee & Chan, 2018).

Most studies in this literature, however, focus on the period of large-scale protest campaigns or when social mobilization is widespread (Leong, Pan, Bahri, & Fauzi, 2019). Yet social movements inevitably

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experience ups and downs (Tarrow, 1989). At the end of a protest cycle, a movement would face the challenge of sustaining itself through a period of abeyance (i.e., when mobilization for collective actions is weak and the social atmosphere is hostile; Taylor, 1989). Understanding how movements survive the period of abeyance is the key to understanding movement continuity. It follows that a more comprehensive understanding of the role of digital media in social movements should likewise pay attention to this period.

Based on the above premise, this study focuses on young people and asks, To what extent do young people engage in political communication and connect themselves to movement activists via social media during the trough of mobilization? How do social media use and connection with political actors shape young people's attitudes toward movement strategies and actions between two peaks of mobilization? Answering these questions should help us understand whether and how social media help generate and maintain young people's protest potential during movement abeyance.

This article examines Hong Kong. In 2014, the city witnessed the Umbrella Movement, in which citizens fought for democratization through occupying streets in the urban center. Starting in June 2019, Hong Kong citizens fought against the government's proposal of an extradition bill by a combination of large-scale demonstrations, peaceful rallies, violent clashes with the police, and a range of other innovative actions. The protests were still ongoing in mid-2020. However, social mobilization was weak and young people were apparently uninterested in politics in the years before the antiextradition bill protests. Against this background and using mainly a survey of university students in March 2019, this article explores the linkages between young people's social media use and attitudes toward continual protests.

### **Movement Abeyance and Individuals' Attitudes Toward Protests**

Contentious collective actions vary in frequencies and intensity across time and place. Tarrow (1989, 1998) developed the notion of cycle of contention to explain the rise and demise of social mobilization over time. A cycle of contention (or a protest cycle) is "a phase of heightened conflict across the social system" involving "a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors" (Tarrow, 1998, p. 142). It begins when available political opportunities lead to the growth of mobilization. But after some initial success, further achievements become more difficult (Santoro & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Meanwhile, there is increased competition for members and resources among the increased number of movement organizations (Cress, McPherson, & Rotolo, 1997). Certain groups thus radicalize to differentiate themselves from the others (della Porta, 2018). Social mobilization ultimately declines because of exhaustion, polarization, loss of public support, and/or repression.

Abeyance begins at the end of a protest cycle. In Taylor's (1989) formulation, abeyance refers to "a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in non-receptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another" (p. 761). Central to the process is the formation of "abeyance structures" that allow groups of committed activists to remain connected with each other and to specific organizations. The groups organize more internal-oriented activities that help maintain activists' network, ideals, vision, and identity. These resources become important bases of mobilization in the next protest cycle. In other words, movement groups or activists had to adjust to the abeyance environment. Jacobsson and Sorbom (2015), for instance, found that radical movement groups in Sweden adopted five

strategies in the period of abeyance—namely, rescaling and targeting on micropolitics, moving from scheduled to open communities, rethinking movement ideology, redefining the boundary of movement discourse, and redefining militancy. Meanwhile, Gade's (2019) analysis of Sunni resistance in Lebanon found that there were four trajectories for activists when the movement went into abeyance—continual but restrained mobilization, disengagement, co-optation, and arena shift (i.e., shifting to other issues and struggles).

Like Gade (2019), the present study focuses on how individuals respond to movement abeyance. But the present study focuses on the attitudes of individual youngsters instead of existing activists. Because of their biographical availability (McAdam, 1986) and youthful idealism, young people were often the main participants in many progressive movements. In fact, as Mannheim (1972) articulated, individuals in their late teens and early 20s have "fresh contact" with the political world. They are mature enough to understand politics, yet "naïve" enough to be heavily influenced by ongoing events (Schuman & Scott, 1989). Therefore, they can be relatively easily drawn into social mobilization at the peak of a protest cycle. But it is unclear how young people would view social movements if they enter their formative years at a time of movement abeyance.

This study posits three possible attitudes that people can hold in a time of movement abeyance: persistence, pessimism, and radicalism. In her analysis of people's movement participation over time, Corrigan-Brown (2012) differentiated among four possible trajectories: persistence, transfer, abeyance, and disengagement. That is, people can either persist in the movement, shift from one movement to another, take occasional "breaks" from participation, or leave social activism altogether. For the present study, which focuses on people's situation at one specific time point, it would be difficult to distinguish between temporary disengagement (i.e., abeyance) and long-term disengagement. But common to long and short-term disengagement is a sense of frustration and pessimism about the current situation as well as the near future. Therefore, pessimism is used to replace abeyance and disengagement in the typology. Transfer, meanwhile, is adjusted to radicalism because of contextual considerations: after the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, many supporters of the prodemocracy movement in Hong Kong have turned to support more radical tactics and ideologies (Lee, 2018). Therefore, in the current context, instead of examining whether people transfer from one movement to another, it is more meaningful to understand whether people are holding more radical attitudes so that they are likely to be "transferred" into more radical protests.

More precisely, persistence refers to the insistence on the importance of continual actions. Here, continual actions can involve old or new forms of actions targeting at original or new targets. They can also refer to either internally or externally oriented actions. But no matter what actions people have in mind, the emphasis is on the will to persist. Pessimism refers to a negative evaluation of the efficacy and meaningfulness of protests and movements. Facing the low point of mobilization, individuals can be overwhelmed by the feeling of powerlessness, and this may become the basis of temporary or permanent disengagement. Radicalism, meanwhile, refers to a preference for tactics that deviate from existing routines and/or ideologies aiming at more fundamental social and political change (Beck, 2015). When protest actions do not attract large numbers of supporters, individuals might see engagement in more disruptive and violent actions as a way for protests to rediscover their impact.

In social movement studies, persistence is often explained in terms of individuals' ties with activists, their roles in movement organizations, and how continual participation in the movement relates to one's personal life (e.g., Mercea, Karatas, & Bastos, 2018; Passy & Giugni, 1997; Tesdahl & Speer, 2015). Radicalization is usually associated with dissatisfaction with movement outcomes (Santoro & Fitzpatrick, 2015). As a process, it is often explained within a relational framework that emphasizes the interactions among movement groups and the authorities (Alimi, Bosi, & Demetriou, 2012; della Porta, 2018). Few studies have examined the factors contributing to the feeling of powerlessness in relation to protests. In any case, the present study does not aim at developing a full theoretical model for explaining such attitudes. The emphasis is to explore how social media use relates to these attitudes.

### **Social Media and Protest Attitude During Movement Abeyance**

Digital and social media play multifarious roles in social movements and have led to the emergence of new forms of protests. Castells (2012) has conceptualized "networked social movement" as a new type of protest campaigns that are decentralized, leaderless, and spontaneous. Central to networked social movements is the formation of action networks and a space of autonomy constituted by urban space and cyberspace. For Bennett and Segerberg (2013), contemporary protests can emerge suddenly and scale up quickly because of activists' expressive behavior and the viral distribution of personal action frames online. Social media platforms also facilitated organization in the crowd by using stitching technologies (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). Drawing on insights from such seminal works, numerous scholars have examined the role played by digital media in protest events around the world (e.g., Caraway, 2016; Chrona & Bee, 2017; Lee & Chan, 2018; Mercea & Funk, 2016; Pond & Lewis, 2019; Toepfl, 2018; Uwalaka, Rickard, & Watkins, 2018).

The literature, however, has focused mainly on major protest events and paid little attention to social media's role during movement abeyance. One exception is Rohman's (2019) analysis of the Indonesian peace movement. Through in-depth interviews, he found that social media networks help maintain relationships among participants, reanimate movement memories, amplify ongoing protests, allow people to follow existing movements, and share new grievances. Leong et al. (2019) also argued that, during movement abeyance, social media can empower people by sustaining participation, solidifying influence, and refining control.

The present study adds to the limited number of studies by examining how social media use relates to attitudes toward protests at the individual level during movement abeyance. Notably, Taylor's (1989) original analysis of movement abeyance focused on a historical period when movements were organized mainly by formal organizations. Later research has focused on how other social institutions may also play a role in explaining movement continuity (Veugelers, 2011). In the contemporary scene where decentralized networked movements (Castells, 2012) or horizontal autonomous movements (Fominaya, 2020) become more frequent and prominent, there is a need to examine how horizontal and decentralized communication platforms may contribute to the maintenance of movement resources and infrastructures during abeyance.

Digital and social media should facilitate the sustainability of social movements by providing the space for counterpublic communication (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Digital and social media allow movement groups and activists to continue to connect with potential supporters. They lower the costs of communication and content distribution (Forde, 2011). Digital and social media are therefore the platforms through which people

can acquire "oppositional knowledge" (Lee, 2015). Hence, political communication via social media was often found to relate positively to protest participation (Hsiao, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). Based on the same considerations, one might also expect a relationship between social media use and more positive attitudes toward protests even when social mobilization is weak.

In addition, two considerations deserve special attention for the present study. First, some studies on social media's impact on protest participation have highlighted the importance of connection with political actors via social media (Tang & Lee, 2013). At the same time, as explicated earlier, studies on movement abeyance have emphasized how certain structures and resources are preserved in times of weak mobilization. Hence, it should be particularly meaningful to examine the extent to which people remain connected to political actors at a time of movement abeyance, and how such connections influence people's attitude toward protests.

Second, people's attitudes toward social movements are likely to be related to how they interpret and evaluate past movements. As scholars on framing have pointed out, an objective situation may lead to different actions depending on how individuals interpret the situation (Snow, 2007). Action taking can depend on the alignment between how an individual looks at an issue and the way movement organizations portray the issue (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). In the context of decentralized movement, actions can depend on whether individuals can connect themselves with the personalized action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Nonetheless, frame alignment is an ongoing process, "temporally variable and subject to reassessment and renegotiation" (Snow et al., 1986, p. 476). In the present study, since abeyance refers to the period between two peaks of mobilization, people's attitudes toward protests in this period are likely to depend on how they evaluate and interpret the previous peak of mobilization (Lee, 2018). An important question is therefore whether and how social media use shapes such evaluations and interpretations. In other words, theoretically speaking, this study posits that social media use might relate to protest attitudes directly as well as indirectly through evaluation of the previous peak of social mobilization.

In summary, this study treats social media as the platform for counterpublic communications. As such, we expect social media to continue to facilitate the formation of more positive attitudes toward protest actions even at a time of low levels of social mobilization. To understand the impact of social media, we should pay attention to people's connection with political actors and evaluation of the previous peak of social mobilization. Given these conceptual considerations, the following section further introduces the research context and sets up relevant research questions and hypotheses.

### **Context and Hypotheses**

The present study was conducted in Hong Kong. In late 2014, the Umbrella Movement occurred as Hong Kong citizens occupied roads in urban districts to call for "genuine popular election" of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. The government stood firm, however. After the use of tear gas by the police backfired and the actions scaled up (Cheng & Chan, 2017; Tang, 2015), the protest evolved into a decentralized campaign comprising mass collective actions, small-group-based actions, and improvised activities (Ho, 2019; Lee & Chan, 2018). The government employed the strategy of attrition and various counterframes to handle the movement (Yuen & Cheng, 2017). As tiredness, frustrations, and inconvenience caused by the occupation accumulated, public opinion increasingly favored a retreat by the protesters. The

occupied areas were evicted in late November and mid-December. The protest ended without tangible achievement on the issue of popular election.

The “failure” of the largely peaceful occupation campaign fueled the growth of more radical politics and actions under the label of “localism” (Kaeding, 2017; Veg, 2017). There rise of “confrontational localists” saw integration with China as Beijing’s annexation of Hong Kong and preferred the use of violent protests to call for political reform (Lo, 2018). Their most prominent action was the “Mongkok riot” in February 2016, and, part of the confrontational localists became separatists. Discussions of Hong Kong independence began to appear in public discourses.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese and Hong Kong government employed a hardline approach in response to movement radicalization. Candidates who called for independence or self-determination were banned from elections. Proindependence groups were outlawed. Several participants in the Mongkok riots were sentenced to up to seven years in jail. In April 2019, nine leaders of the Umbrella Movement were found guilty of incitement.

The political environment was therefore highly hostile to the democracy movement between 2016 and 2019. Mobilization declined during this period. Several protests against the government’s disqualification of legislators, for instance, were attended by only a few thousand citizens. There were widespread discussions of feelings of powerlessness among the public. Young people had apparently lost interest in political affairs. Commentators noted the lack of young people in protests. The huge and sustained antiextradition bill protests since June 2019 and young people’s active participation were unexpected (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019).

This study was conducted in March 2019 (i.e., when social mobilization was seemingly at its low point). The concern is how young people in Hong Kong at the time engaged in political communication via social media and how social media use related to their evaluations of the Umbrella Movement and attitudes toward protests. Several research questions and hypotheses are set up to guide the analysis. The first is simply a question about the extent of young people’s political communication via social media:

*RQ1: To what extent did young people use social media for political communication, and to what extent were they connected to political actors via social media?*

As discussed earlier, in a time of movement abeyance, how people see social protests is likely to relate to how they evaluate the previous peak of social mobilization. In Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement “failed” to force the government to concede on democratization, but some activists argued that the movement had contributed to the awakening of the public. Young people’s perceptions of the Umbrella Movement are likely to be shaped by the messages they encountered online. Yet it is unclear whether social media use should lead to a positive view toward the Umbrella Movement. Meanwhile, no matter how people develop their

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<sup>1</sup> In a poll conducted by the Center for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2016, 17% of all respondents and 40% of respondents between 15 and 24 years of age supported Hong Kong independence ([http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/images/news/TaskForce\\_PressRelease\\_160722c\\_English.pdf](http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/images/news/TaskForce_PressRelease_160722c_English.pdf)).

interpretations of the Umbrella Movement, those who felt more positive should be more likely to hold the attitude of persistence. In contrast, both pessimism and radicalism may relate to a negative evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. That is, when people feel that the previous movement has failed, they might either develop a sense of inefficacy or the urge to adopt more radical actions. Hence, the next research question and hypothesis are:

*RQ2: How do connection with political actors and political communication via social media relate to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement?*

*H1: Evaluation of the Umbrella Movement relates (a) positively to persistence, (b) negatively to pessimism, and (c) negatively to radicalism.*

Political communication and connection with political actors via social media can also relate directly to attitudes toward protests. As social media are the platforms for counterpublic communication (Lee, 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014), political communication and connection with political actors via social media should relate positively to persistence and negatively to pessimism. Yet it is unclear how social media use would relate to radicalism because alternative media and online opinion leaders vary in their preferred movement tactics and ideologies. People might develop varying attitudes toward radicalism depending on the mix of materials they consumed (Lee, 2018). Hence, two hypotheses and one research question are posed:

*H2: Political communication via social media relates (a) positively to persistence and (b) negatively to pessimism.*

*H3: Connection with political actors via social media relates (a) positively to persistence and (b) negatively to pessimism.*

*RQ3: How do connection with political actors and political communication via social media relate to radicalism?*

### **Method and Data**

Data analyzed below came from a survey of university students in Hong Kong conducted in March 2019. Multistage stratified sampling was employed. First, three public universities were randomly selected from the eight publicly funded universities in the city.<sup>2</sup> Then, two departments within each faculty within the universities were selected. In each department, two undergraduate-level courses were randomly selected. Requests were made to the instructors of the selected classes for permission to distribute the questionnaires. If they refused or did not respond, another class in the department was randomly chosen as a replacement. There were two rounds of invitations. A total of 30 instructors replied affirmatively (response rate = 32%). On the designated days, research assistants distributed the questionnaires to the students in class. The students completed the survey on a voluntary basis. Of the total of 1,540 students registered in the 30 classes, 908 valid responses were obtained (response rate = 59%).

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<sup>2</sup> In Hong Kong, the most important universities are all publicly funded.

Part of the analysis will compare the March 2019 data with data derived from another survey of university students conducted in November 2014, which was during the Umbrella Movement. The same multistage stratified sampling method was used. Two research universities and two teaching universities were first randomly selected, followed by the random selection of two to three faculties within each university, and then by selection of departments and classes within each faculty. A total of 27 selected courses agreed to participate (response rate = 26%). The sample had 795 valid cases (response rate at the student level = 51%). The main variables are operationalized as follows.

### ***Social Media Use Variables***

The questionnaire asked the respondents to name their three most frequently used social media sites. For each of the two most frequently used sites, a set of additional questions were asked, some of which were used to construct the social media use variables.

Specifically, for *political communication via social media*, the respondents were asked to indicate, for each of the two most frequently used social media sites, whether they would (1) share or retweet contents related to public affairs, (2) share or retweet contents related to political issues, (3) share public affairs contents with those connected via social media, and (4) share contents related to political issues with those connected via social media. Answers were registered using a 4-point scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *very frequently*). The eight items (4 questions × 2 social media sites) were summed to form the index ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ,  $M = 18.09$ ,  $SD = 5.23$ ).

For connection with political actors via social media, respondents indicated, for each of the two most frequently used sites, whether their social media friends or followers include (1) journalists or public affairs commentators, (2) academics, (3) government officials, (4) district councilors or legislators, and (5) social movement activists. Answers were registered using a 4-point scale (0 = *none* to 3 = *a lot*). The 10 items (5 questions × 2 social media sites) were summed to form an index ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ,  $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 6.59$ ). Further descriptive statistics of two main independent variables are discussed in the Analysis and Results section.

Moreover, the respondents were asked about the amount of time per day they spent on each of the two most frequently used sites. Time spent using social media was the sum of the two ( $M = 221.4$  minutes,  $SD = 191.4$ ). It serves as a control variable in the analysis.

### ***Umbrella Movement-Related Variables***

Evaluation of the Umbrella Movement was measured by asking the respondents to indicate, on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 4 = *strongly agree*), whether they would agree with three statements: (1) The occupy movement contributed to the awakening of many Hong Kong people, (2) although the occupy movement failed to achieve tangible outcomes, it is nonetheless one step in the prodemocracy movement, and (3) on the whole, the occupy movement was a failure. Respondents who gave an invalid answer were recoded as having a score of 2.5. The index was then created by having the average of the first two items (which are correlated with each other at  $r = .57$ ) subtracting the third item ( $M = 0.36$ ,  $S.D. = 0.99$ ). Higher scores represent more positive evaluations of the movement.

As a control variable, support for the Umbrella Movement was the average of the respondents' answers to two questions: (1) whether they supported the Umbrella Movement, and (2) whether they were concerned about the movement when it occurred. Both were registered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very opposed to/unconcerned* to 5 = *very supportive/concerned*). Although support and concern are conceptually distinctive, the two items were highly correlated ( $r = .57$ ) and therefore combined for parsimony ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).

Participation in the Umbrella Movement is another control variable. The respondents were also asked whether they had participated in the movement by going to the occupied site. The answers ranged from 0 (*no*) to 2 (*yes and often*). Because most of the junior university students were very young five years ago, 63% of the respondents did not participate in the Umbrella Movement. Only 5.1% replied "yes and often" ( $M = 0.42$ ,  $S.D. = 0.59$ ).

### **Attitudes Toward Protests**

The main dependent variables are three attitudes toward protests: persistence, pessimism, and radicalism. They were measured by a set of items asking the respondents to indicate, using a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*), whether they agreed with six statements: (1) it is necessary to persist on continual actions, no matter what the situation is; (2) despite the unfavorable situation, people seeking social change can consider other forms of actions to continue [the movement]; (3) in the current situation, changing the society has already become impossible; (4) the government does not respond to the public, so no matter what people do, social movements have become meaningless; (5) Hong Kong people need to adopt more confrontational means to fight against injustice; and (6) social movements need to consider escalating their actions. An invalid answer was recoded as 2.5 on the scale. Items 1 and 2 were averaged to represent persistence ( $r = .40$ ,  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ). Items 3 and 4 were averaged to represent pessimism ( $r = .67$ ,  $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), and the last two items were averaged to represent radicalism ( $r = .86$ ,  $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). Radicalism is positively and significantly related to both pessimism ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and persistence ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Pessimism and persistence are not significantly correlated ( $r = .06$ ).

### **Other Control Variables**

In addition to those already introduced, other control variables include four demographics (age, sex, self-reported familial socioeconomic status, and ethnic minority status). Several basic political attitudes were controlled because of their possible relationships with social media use and protest attitudes. They included sense of civic duty, internal efficacy, external efficacy, collective efficacy, and interests in politics (each measured by agreement with two statements, except interests in politics, which was indicated by agreement with one statement). Moreover, time spent consuming news information—the total of time spent each day consuming news information from "traditional media" and "online media"—was also controlled. Details of operationalization are omitted because of space concerns.

### **Analysis and Results**

The analysis proceeds by addressing the research questions and hypotheses in order. We first examine the extent of the respondents' political communication and connection with political actors via social

media (*RQ1*), followed by whether social media use was related to young people's evaluation of the Umbrella Movement (*RQ2*). We then examine the predictors of attitudes toward protests to tackle the research hypotheses and *RQ3*.

### **Levels of Political Communication and Connection with Political Actors via Social Media**

To address *RQ1*, Table 1 summarizes the findings from the 2019 survey and compared them with findings in November 2014. The comparison is not aimed at testing hypotheses about changes in university students' social media use over time. The 2014 survey is used as a reference point so that we can put the descriptive findings from the 2019 survey into better perspective.

**Table 1. Political Communication Activities and Connection With Political Actors via Social Media.**

	11/2014 Site 1 (%)	3/2019 Site 1 (%)	3/2019 Site 2 (%)
Political communication activities:			
Share or retweet contents related to public affairs	44.6	38.1	27.8
Share or retweet contents related to political issues	39.8	28.5	22.3
Share with those connected via social media contents related to public affairs	81.4	63.0	48.2
Share with those connected via social media contents related to political issues	81.1	53.0	42.0
Connection with political actors:			
Journalists or public affairs commentators	31.2	27.1	23.0
Academics	30.7	27.8	21.5
Government officials	7.5	11.6	12.0
District councilors or legislators	11.8	15.7	14.9
Social movement activists	33.3	23.3	19.5

*Note.* Entries in the first four rows are percentages answering "sometimes" or "frequently" on a 4-point scale. Entries in the bottom half of the table are percentages answering "several" or "a lot."

Several findings shown in Table 1 can be highlighted. First, levels of political communication activities via the most frequently used social media site declined from November 2014 to March 2019. After all, the two time points represent the peak and trough of social mobilization. However, degree of political communication via social media in March 2019 remains substantial: 63% had shared public affairs contents with their social media friends, and more than half had shared contents related to political issues with their social media friends.

Second, in November 2014, about one-third of the respondents had "several" or "a lot" of connections with social movement activists via their most frequently used social media site. The percentage declined to 23.3% in March 2019. However, the decline in percentages of respondents connected to journalists or public affairs commentators and to academics was only minimal. Interestingly, percentages of respondents connected to officials or political representatives were even slightly higher in March 2019. The latter might be because more government officials and political representatives have established their social media presence over the

years. But regardless of the reasons, the implication is that young people were not substantially less connected to political actors via social media in March 2019.

Third, the respondents also had some political communication activities and connection with political actors via the second social media site. The 2014 survey did not ask respondents to report political communication behavior related to the second most frequently used social media. Hence, there is no basis for direct comparison. However, it is notable that, in the 2014 survey, when asked to name their three most frequently used social media sites, only 59.7% of the respondents named a second social media site, and only 19.1% named a third site. In 2019, 94.5% of the respondents named a second social media site, and 49.5% named a third. That is, by 2019, young people had become active on a larger number of social media sites. This allowed them to engage in political communication via a more diverse range of social media platforms. This could have mitigated the negative impact of the social environment on young people's connectedness to activism and to politics in general.

### ***Predicting Evaluation of the Umbrella Movement***

To examine whether social media use was related to young people's evaluation of the Umbrella Movement, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, with both political communication and social connections via social media, plus all the controls, as the independent variables. As Table 2 shows, females and those with higher levels of collective efficacy (i.e., those who believed in the Hong Kong public's capability to effect social change when acting collectively) viewed the Umbrella Movement more positively. Interestingly, both interests in politics and news exposure related negatively to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement.

***Table 2. Regression on Evaluation of the Umbrella Movement (UM).***

	Overall evaluation
Sex	.22***
Age	-.02
SES	.01
Minority	-.00
Civic duty	.05
Internal efficacy	.03
External efficacy	.06
Collective efficacy	.24***
Interests in politics	-.08*
News exposure	-.08*
UM support	.26***
UM participate	-.13***
Social media: time spent	.00
Social media: political communication	.11**
Social media: connection with political actors	-.08*
Adjusted $R^2$	.188***

*Note.* Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values are replaced by means.  $N = 908$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .

Support for the Umbrella Movement was related to a more positive view toward the movement. This can be easily understood in terms of people's tendency to reduce cognitive dissonance or defend one's own worldview. But taking this into account, it is remarkable that participation in the Umbrella Movement was negatively related to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. The latter finding needs to be understood in relation to the actual happenings in the occupation campaign. The Umbrella Movement not only "failed" to achieve the goal of genuine popular election, the latter stages of the campaign were marked by internal dissension (Lee & Chan, 2018). When attitudinal support for the movement was controlled, the participation experience itself could be colored by a strong sense of disappointment and frustration.

Sheer time spent on social media did not relate significantly to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. Interestingly, though political communication via social media related positively to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement, those who had more connections with political actors via social media viewed the outcome of the Umbrella Movement more negatively. One plausible explanation of this pattern of findings is to acknowledge that there is a mix of online outlets and opinion leaders who interpreted the movement differently (Lee, 2018). The positive relationship between political communication via social media and evaluation of the Umbrella Movement suggested that, overall, political discourses about the Umbrella Movement remained positive in tone in the online arena. But once overall political communication via social media is controlled, connection with political actors might capture mainly the influence of those online opinion leaders who viewed the Umbrella Movement negatively.

### ***Predicting Attitudes Toward Protests***

We can now turn to the various hypotheses and the remaining research question regarding how evaluation of the Umbrella Movement and social media use relate to protest attitudes. Multiple regression analyses were conducted with the three protest attitudes as the dependent variables, whereas the independent variables were those in the model in Table 2 plus evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. Table 3 summarizes the findings. Among the control variables, females and senior students were less likely to adopt pessimism and radicalism. Besides, external efficacy is significantly negatively related to all three protest attitudes. In contrast to external efficacy, collective efficacy relates positively to persistence and negatively to pessimism. Support for the Umbrella Movement related positively to all three dependent variables. Supporters of the Umbrella Movement were likely to be supportive toward protests in general. Hence, they were more likely to hold the attitude of persistence and even radicalism. Yet Umbrella Movement supporters were also likely to be troubled by the movement's inefficacy. This might explain the tendency to feel pessimistic.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis on Attitudes Toward Protests.**

	Persistence	Pessimism	Radicalism
Sex	-.01	-.10**	-.08**
Age	.05	-.06*	-.07*
SES	.03	-.06	.01
Minority	-.03	.02	.04
Civic duty	.11**	-.06	-.01
Internal efficacy	-.03	.00	.02
External efficacy	-.12***	-.32***	-.18***
Collective efficacy	.15***	-.20***	.03
Interests in politics	-.02	.04	.11**
News exposure	-.04	.05	-.02
UM support	.29***	.17***	.28***
UM participate	.03	-.02	.04
UM evaluation	.11**	-.13***	.01
Social media: time spent	-.02	.04	.09**
Social media: political com.	.09**	.01	.05
Social media: conn. political actors	-.03	-.10**	.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.235***	.250***	.246***

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values are replaced by means. UM = Umbrella Movement;  $N = 908$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .

Meanwhile, consistent with *H1a* and *H1b*, evaluation of the Umbrella Movement indeed related significantly positively to persistence and negatively to pessimism. The coefficient for the relationship between evaluation of the Umbrella Movement and radicalism is close to zero. Nevertheless, further analysis was conducted by replacing the single evaluation of Umbrella Movement variable with perceived success and perceived failure of the Umbrella Movement as the independent variables. The findings show that both perceived success and perceived failure related significantly to radicalism ( $\beta = .11$  and  $.09$ , respectively,  $p < .01$  in both cases).<sup>3</sup> The latter finding is consistent with the argument behind *H1c*.

Political communication via social media related positively to persistence, but not significantly to pessimism. Only *H2a*, but not *H2b*, is supported. Meanwhile, connection with political actors via social media related significantly negatively to pessimism, but not significantly positively to persistence. Only *H3b*, but not *H3a*, is supported. In other words, each of the two political use of social media variables relates to one protest attitude in the expected manner. Regarding *RQ3*, neither of the two political use of social media variable related to radicalism significantly.

<sup>3</sup> The same post hoc analysis using persistence and pessimism as the dependent variables found that only perceived success of the Umbrella Movement significantly related to persistence ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and only perceived failure of the Umbrella Movement significantly related to pessimism ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Concluding Discussion

This study is interested in young people's political communication behaviors via social media and how social media use relates to protest attitudes during movement abeyance. The analysis shows that, when findings from the 2014 and 2019 surveys were compared, there were signs of lower levels of social media political communication activities in March 2019. But one might argue that the differences were rather minimal because November 2014 was the height of social mobilization during the Umbrella Movement.

Some factors might mitigate the negative impact of the social atmosphere on the extent of political communication activities via social media. First, over the period between 2014 and 2019, social media have continued to grow. Young people could have simply spent even more time on a more diverse range of social media sites, and more political actors have become active on social media platforms. To the extent that news consumption on social media is often incidental (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, Chen & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013), young people could still be brought into the political communication processes even if they have become less likely to proactively engage with political matters. Second, many young people have connected themselves with public actors ranging from journalists to social movement activists. The connections might be established when a controversial issue that concerns the young people arose. Once the connections were set up, young people might not have the reasons to "unfriend" the political actors, even when the controversy ended. That is, once the online network is built, the network is likely to remain, regardless of changes in the social atmosphere.

Therefore, even during movement abeyance, social media networks remain the conduits through which political communication occurs, and such political communication activities can shape individuals' attitudes toward contentious politics. This posits that social media use might affect protest attitudes directly or through influencing how people evaluate the previous peak of social mobilization. Combining the findings from Tables 2 and 3 together, political communication via social media relate to the attitude of persistence both directly and indirectly through evaluation of the Umbrella Movement (the indirect path is statistically significant at  $t = 2.26$ ,  $p < .03$  in a Sobel test). Besides, although political communication via social media do not directly relate to pessimism, it has a significant indirect relationship with pessimism through evaluation of the Umbrella Movement (the indirect path is statistically significant at  $t = 2.50$ ,  $p < .02$  in a Sobel test).

There are nuances in how social media use might relate to protest attitudes. Social media connection with political actors relates negatively to evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. Because evaluation of the Umbrella Movement relates positively to persistence, the findings suggest a path through which connection with political actors could undermine persistence through evaluation of the Umbrella Movement. However, additional analysis shows that the indirect path is statistically insignificant. Rather, social media connection with political actors relates significantly negatively to the feeling of pessimism. If only the statistically significant paths are considered, the main findings from Tables 2 and 3 consistently point to a positive relationship between protest attitudes and political communication via social media.

A few theoretical lessons can be taken away from the present study. Studies of movement abeyance have emphasized how movement continuity relies on the maintenance of infrastructures and resources

during the low point of movement mobilization (Taylor, 1989; Veugelers, 2011). Two most recent studies have documented how social media may continue to play certain roles in sustaining social movements during movement abeyance (Leong et al., 2019; Rohman, 2019). The current findings echo those studies. Besides, it adds to the literature by showing how social media relate to protest attitudes at the individual level, and the focus on university students illustrates how social media can help build the protest potential of young people who might not have much protest experience before.

Social media continue to provide the platforms for counterpublic communications (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Lee, 2015) and the carrier of movement-related networks even in a time of abeyance. Social media can aid the maintenance of movement infrastructures and resources, such as connection with political actors and a more positive view toward protests. The latter may play an important role in drawing people into the next wave of protests. In fact, as noted earlier in the article, in the age of networked social movements (Castells, 2012) or autonomous social movements (Fominaya, 2020) marked by personalized participation and the lack of central leadership, more decentralized and horizontal platforms such as social media can become particularly pertinent to the maintenance of movement networks and resources.

In addition, this study highlights evaluation of the Umbrella Movement as a link between social media use and protest attitudes. This study echoes the tradition of framing research (Snow, 2007; Snow et al., 1986) and points toward the role of interpretations in the connection between communication activities and attitudinal or behavior outcomes. The interpretation and evaluation processes are ongoing. People may form an immediate evaluation of a protest campaign when it ends, but such initial evaluations can be subjected to further reassessment. But at any specific moment in time, interpretation and evaluation of a past peak of mobilization could shape people's attitude toward protests in the future (Lee, 2018).

We need to acknowledge a few limitations. First, this study finds no systematic relationships among political communication via social media, evaluation of the Umbrella Movement, and radicalism. As mentioned earlier, there can be a mix of alternative media sites and online opinion leaders holding different views toward radical movement goals and tactics. The impact of social media on radicalism may therefore depend on the more precise online discourses encountered by users. Future research can try to disentangle such relationships.

Second, with a cross-sectional survey, this study only establishes certain patterns of relationships among the variables. Readers might question whether it was an emphasis on persistence that led young people to be more engaged in political communication via social media, and whether it was a feeling of pessimism that led young people to be less connected to public actors. These alternative interpretations are not implausible. In fact, the most probable scenario is that social-media-based political communication activities/networks and attitudes toward protests had mutually influenced each other. Nevertheless, even without clearly specifying the direction of causality, it remains an important finding that political communication via social media is embedded in a set of systematic relationships that have implications on the continuity of social movements.

Third, the social media landscape is quickly evolving. For example, there has been a widely observed shift from Facebook to Instagram among young people in Hong Kong. Given the varying

affordances of and user practices in different sites, different sites may be useful for sustaining movement infrastructure and resources. Research can investigate the relative contributions of different social media platforms to movement continuity.

Fourth, this study focuses on Hong Kong, a hybrid regime having a distinctive trajectory of social mobilization in past decades, especially since the early 2000s (Cheng & Yuen, 2018). Generalizability of the findings inevitably need to be confirmed through analyses in other contexts. Nevertheless, the rationales underlying the research hypotheses are not context specific. We expect similar findings to be derivable in other countries.

Despite such limitations, the present study helps to build up an area of inquiry that connects the study of social media to the study of social movements in new ways. At the practical level, this study also suggests that social movement activists and groups should consider how to better use digital and social media as means to maintain connections with existing and potential supporters even at times when the political environment is hostile.

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