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Mundane Participation: Power Imbalances in Youth Media Use

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Abstract

This study aims at revisiting the notion of participatory culture at a time when social media use is deemed even more central and hence mundane in our everyday lives. Through 10 focus group interviews with 67 secondary students in Hong Kong, the study focuses on the experiences of a generation of young people who are generally savvy social media users, yet facing immense uncertainties brought by political and social changes in recent years. The research analyzed participation through a framework proposed by Carpentier, which considered various factors in participatory processes. It was found that the high hopes for more civic and democratic participation in digital media remained unfulfilled. On the contrary, our findings showed consistent passive participation in youths' media use, which greatly benefited platforms and media organizations in maintaining "an architecture of passive participation." The young knew about these mechanisms but there was little resentment or resistance. Despite the remarkable power imbalances in their everyday media participation, the young users were not only indifferent but showed tendencies to practice self-surveillance through passive participation and active non-participation.

Keywords

youth media use, media participation, social media, power, Hong Kong

Introduction

When Web 2.0 technologies were first introduced in the early 2000s, it was envisioned that the internet would become an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2004). Participation has been hailed as a key characteristic in the new media environment wherein the agency of users has become highly visible with the proliferation of user-generated content (van Dijck, 2009). Two decades have passed, and the sociality and interactivity that are much emphasized in social media have made participation a default feature. It has never been easy to define participation, but it becomes even harder to do so in the participatory culture, considering that the same word can refer to activities as simple as clicking the "like" button or as sophisticated as posting a long post aimed at mobilization.

Delwiche and Henderson (2013) categorized the development of the participatory culture into four distinct phases. It first emerged between 1985 and 1993; then there was the "waking up the Web" period between 1994 and 1998. From 1999 to 2004, "push-button publishing" enabled fast and easy production. From 2005 to 2011, the rapid development in devices and applications contributed to a media environment with ubiquitous connections. According to this framework, teenagers today were born into an era when connections were not only plentiful but also taken for granted. The young grow up having ready access to mobile devices and are used to going online for solutions to whatever problems they come across. The internet is growing into a massive "architecture" in which users spend long hours taking part in a wide range of activities. How does it shape or change the "architecture" when the forms and levels of participation vary? Studies have long found that young people are not necessarily active online participants (Neves et al., 2018; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). It has been noted that the level of participation depends on factors like political and social conditions, which influence the motivations and behaviors of participation, as shown by the experiences in Cambodia (A. Lee, 2018) and Hong Kong (D. Chu, 2020).

This study aims to revisit the notion of participatory culture at a time when social media use is deemed even more central and, hence, mundane in our everyday lives. The

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Literature Review

Participation Goes Digital

Long before the advent of digital technologies, there were deep concerns about the role and importance of participation in various societal fields (Carpentier, 2014). As participation goes increasingly digital, there have been high hopes for its political and social impact in different disciplines (Literat, 2016). In the field of media and communication, content production has become much easier with digitization. More people can produce, publish, and share their own media. However, social media provide ample networking opportunities for people to connect and interact. Much interest has been directed toward how various digital participation opportunities are utilized in protest mobilization and social movements (Robertson, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017). These findings have often highlighted the benefits of reduced costs, easier recruitment, and connectivity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; González-Bailón et al., 2011). Carpentier et al. (2013) examined the relationships between the development of communication technologies and waves of democratization. He found that despite discontinuities from time to time, the general trends suggest that new technological affordances did lead to more participation and equality in the media sphere.

Yet, more participation and more equality are not equivalent to good and desirable participation. The same new technological affordances can be used for malicious purposes that bring negative consequences, forming the dark side of online participation (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). New modes of participation, such as networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and slacktivism (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009), also hardly fit the conventional expectations of "good civic participation." To understand the shifting trends in civic participation among Finnish youths, Lonkila and Jokivuori (2022) analyzed likes and shares on social media as "nano-level participation." The social groundlessness and context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) commonly associated with social media have prompted users to avoid, withdraw, or disconnect from media participation altogether (Hayes et al., 2006; Neves et al., 2018; Thorson, 2014). Albeit being relatively invisible, nano-level participation and non-participation are also integral parts of the much-celebrated participatory culture.

Despite the positive undertone underlying participation, it should be noted that highly engaged participants are always in the minority. Nielsen (2006) proposed the 90-9-1 rule, in which 90% of users were lurkers, 9% contributed from time to time, and 1% participated a lot and contributed the most. Similarly, Fu et al. (2016) found that critical citizens accounted for 14.2% of Hong Kong youths under survey, while 41.8% belonged to the disengaged group. In short, it is often difficult to get people involved, or to participate, even if there are now more opportunities (Almgren & Olsson, 2015). Participation inequality or a participation gap is still readily observable.

Participation and Power Imbalances

The various forms of participation caution about the complexities of participation. Casemajor et al. (2015) asserted that participation and non-participation should be conceptualized as a relational framework in which both processes contributed to the shaping of the overall digital media environment. They proposed four categories of participation, including active participation, passive participation, active non-participation and passive non-participation. Unlike active participation which emphasized on one's agency, passive participation drew attention to activities one had to take part in regardless of one's own will. For example, whether users like it or not, their access and interactions online are "recorded, analysed, and exploited by companies and institutions for their own purposes" (Casemajor et al., 2015, p. 858). In view of these unavoidable activities, however, one could also intentionally adopt a tactic of active non-participation. In this regard, non-participation was not necessarily negative and insignificant, as it was depicted in the ladder of participation by Arnstein (1969). Quite to the contrary, it could be analyzed as a form of political action as deliberated in Casemajor et al. (2015).

The concern for "power" has been remarkable in participatory research. Carpentier (2016) reviewed the definitions of participation and other pressing issues in relevant studies and identified two major strands. The sociological approach defines participation as taking part in certain social processes, while the political approach focuses on the decision-making processes through which power relations were equalized. Given the manifestations of participation in new and diverse ways (Theocharis, 2015), there is a growing need for an analytical framework that can be applied in understanding the complexities in participation. Carpentier (2011, 2016) proposed to analyze participation through examining the fields, the actors, the power relations and decision-making in participatory processes.

> If participation is still taken to refer to the equalization of the power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors, in formal or informal decision-making processes, within a particular context, then this choice requires these processes (and sub-processes or micro processes), contexts, actors, decisions and power relations to be theorized and defined, and then to be analysed (Carpentier, 2016, p. 77).

Comparatively speaking, the sociological definition of participation is too generalized and encompassing. Everyone

is taking part in some kind of activity every day. If participation can mean anything, it does not mean anything. Yet, as Melucci (1989, p. 174) noted, participation is meant to "promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the 'general interests' of the community." By taking part, the actors need to engage in certain activities and decide the valence of such activities. These social processes also demand considerable agency on the part of actors. Consumer participation in the form of boycott or buycott, for example, can be understood as passive participation and active participation respectively. Both actions aim at challenging existing power relations between consumers and certain products. The potential to address a power imbalance is implied in any participation as long as agency is involved. Nonetheless, power imbalances in participation in the sociological sense are far less studied than those in political participation.

Digital participation is often perceived to be a potential force to disrupt existing power relations. However, it has also been observed that powerful forces are exerting influences on digital participation. A. Lee (2018) discussed the many hidden tactics young people in Cambodia adopted in the censored environment. T. H. Chu and Yeo (2020) tracked how politically inclined youth in Hong Kong adopted "disconnective practices" in their mediated participation. Power imbalances are bound to be complex and dynamic for both political and social participation. The present research aims to identify and discuss such power imbalances in the now mundane digital participation of young people in Hong Kong.

Youth Media Use in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, as in many other developed societies, time spent on the internet has been increasing for years. Statistics showed that people in Hong Kong spent an average of 6 hr and 16 min on the internet each day in 2019. The figure rose to 7 hr 15 min in 2020 (We are social, 2021). The internet was used by 99.8% of people aged between 10 and 24 years, 94.2% of whom had their own smartphones (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2022). These statistics speak of the prevalence and ordinariness of digital devices and practices in our everyday lives.

Given the high penetration rate, it should not be surprising that young people in Hong Kong are generally considered savvy media users. Since 2012, waves of social movements have seen the rise of young protesters. In 2014, a *Time* cover story featured a prominent student activist who had then just turned 18, and described the Umbrella Movement as a "youthquake" (Rauhala, 2014). The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in 2019 further highlighted the role of online media in facilitating participation. Studies have examined how youths participated in the movements in and through digital media (F. L. F. Lee, 2020; A. Y. L. Lee & Ting, 2015; F. L. F. Lee et al., 2017, 2019; Ting, 2020).

Notwithstanding such active participation, participation inequality or a participation gap has also been observed. Passive participation or active non-participation has been evident among secondary school students (D. Chu, 2020). The passing of the new National Security Law in July 2020 introduced great uncertainties to freedom of expression. Meanwhile, the pandemic has driven many activities online. People are spending more time teaching, learning, meeting and socializing online. On one hand, online participation is facing more uncertainties and is perceived to be riskier; on the other hand, it is becoming more central in our daily lives.

It is in this context that Hong Kong provides a most relevant and intriguing research venue through which we explore the dominant patterns of youth digital participation in the first place, and how such participation illuminates issues about power in the second.

Research Questions and Methods

This study aims to produce a renewed account of participatory culture in which digital technologies have made participation increasingly easy and convenient, and hence also more mundane. Inspired by studies in political participation, this research is interested in identifying the major forms of participation, participatory processes, and the ensuing power imbalances in youth media participation.

It asks two major sets of questions.

1. How do young people participate in and through various media?
2. How do young people participate in the online environment? What facilitates or constrains their participation, and how do they evaluate the pros and cons of participation?

The two sets of questions were included in a wider study about boredom and media use. This article only presents findings regarding media use. Focus group interviews were organized and conducted with 10 groups of secondary school students in Hong Kong in May 2022 (hereafter referred as Schools 1–10). With the help of school teachers from six secondary schools, a total of 67 students were recruited. Five groups were composed of a total of 31 junior secondary students (aged 12–15 years); the other five groups were formed by a total of 36 senior secondary students (aged 16–18 years). There were 5–10 participants in each group. Seven groups were mixed, with both boys and girls, while one group included only boys and two groups included only girls. In sum, 35 were boys and 32 were girls. All participants returned consent forms signed by their parents before the meetings.

In view of health risks related to the pandemic, five meetings were conducted via Zoom, while the other five were conducted in a face-to-face setting. It is noteworthy that Hong Kong schools vary according to educational attainment and socio-economic background. The six schools participating in

this study are considered to be good schools with above average academic performance.

During the fifth wave of coronavirus disease-19 in Hong Kong in early 2022, all primary and secondary schools were suspended for up to 2 months. Students were given "special holidays" and schools resumed normal operation in May 2022. Focus group meetings were arranged within the first 2 weeks of the reopening of schools. It was hoped that we could tap into the fresh memory of the "special holidays" when there were supposedly more online activities. Each meeting lasted for about an hour and was conducted in Cantonese. The author hosted all 10 sessions.

All meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were read and re-read for recurring themes. Since the questions centered on media use, there have been repeated mentions about ownership and use of digital devices, parental intervention, standard routines, and unusual practices, across all 10 groups. Responses from students were organized under these major categories and were further reviewed. A few key themes about the participatory processes were induced from these responses.

Findings and Discussion

This section reports and discusses the findings collected from the 10 focus group interviews regarding everyday digital participation. It was found that the analytical framework by Carpentier (2016) was particularly useful and relevant in unpacking the otherwise messy and complicated participatory processes. For clarity of presentation, findings are organized and presented with reference to this model.

The Fields

Different kinds of digital devices and applications formed the key fields where the young took part in three daily activities. This section will first review the mundanity of such use and discuss the goals in the participatory processes.

The Mundane Digital Life

Most of our respondents entered the fields at an early age. With one notable exception, who got his first smartphone at 15, almost all in this study got their first phones around the age of 8 years. Very often, these phones were used by parents or family members, and were given to children for easier communication. It did not take long for them to discover different types of applications. Instagram and YouTube were the most mentioned and were almost synonymous with "media" in the youths' eyes. Gamers installed Discord; some senior students preferred Signals for their security in instant messaging; some used WeChat. They knew that it took just a few clicks to go online. E-learning in school has made the experience even more mundane.

A group of junior secondary students reminisced their first encounters with computers in primary school.

Boy 2: We were in primary school when we first used computers. Once you started using it, you realized that there was a lot to play with.
Boy 3: Yes, back then we had to go online to find information for homework.
Girl 1: Then we are having a lot of online classes these days, also we hand in homework online!
Girl 3: I remember it was when I was in primary 1 or 2. My parents were not free, so they gave me an iPad. They said I could just type in any questions. I started to watch a lot of YouTube when I was still a kid: I could watch for hours and would trouble no one by just sitting there. (School 4, junior secondary students)

Although all devices enabled them to go online, there were some fine distinctions. The following two quotes showed how young people assigned uses for different devices.

> I prefer using the computer for Google Classroom to check out homework and PowerPoint. The screen is bigger. It is too small to view on the phone, but I still do so. (Why so?) Because I am lazy. If I have to use my computer, I have to turn it on, wait for it to get ready to start Google . . . it takes some five to six minutes. It is more direct if I just turn to my phone which is always by my side. (School 7, male junior secondary student)

> I use my phone and computer for entertainment but not the iPad. I want to set a specific device for work. I don't want to be distracted. So there is not any entertainment on the iPad . . . Frankly, I want to do serious stuff on the computer, too. Unfortunately, I cannot keep to it. So I can just use an iPad for this purpose now. (School 10, female senior secondary student)

When it came to applications, there were also strong tendencies to stick to the most familiar ones. While acknowledging the importance of Facebook to users from previous generations, our respondents were not keen on it. They did download the application so that they could receive information from their teachers, who preferred using it. They were aware that Facebook owned Instagram and WhatsApp and thought they were basically the "same," yet they still preferred Instagram, as elaborated by respondents from two schools.

> When I had my first phone, the first app I downloaded was Instagram. I discovered Facebook only after a while. I tried to use it but its interface looked strange and I don't really know how to navigate there. I'd rather stick to Instagram in this case. (School 3, female junior secondary student)

Boy 1: Well, Facebook feels like a legacy from the past.
Boy 2: The major function of Facebook is to tie in to other game accounts. If you have not registered with Facebook, it will be rather troublesome to log in.

Boy 3: We all know that Instagram and WhatsApp grew out of Facebook. Facebook is like . . . hm . . . the most foundational thing here. (School 4, junior secondary students)

Regardless of how the young people assigned uses for their devices and applications, they were the media the young people used regularly, frequently, and interchangeably. They constituted the fields where the young take part to meet three major goals.

Goals and Participatory Processes

Following Carpentier (2016), once the fields are identified, we should examine the goals of the participatory processes. What do young people do in the fields and why do they take part in these activities? In this study, respondents talked about how they used media for information, entertainment and sociality. While the goals were clear, the processes were characterized by a strong sense of passivity and serendipity.

To Inform. To begin with, young people still watched television news, a supposedly legacy media, from time to time. It provided them with some general information about what was going on around the world. Yet they rarely turned the television on themselves. It was always their parents and family members who were watching and they just picked up whatever messages they came across.

The majority of respondents said they used Instagram and YouTube to stay informed about different kinds of news. For "news and happenings," they included everything from that related to their immediate social circles to news around the world. When they opened Instagram, they refreshed the feed and saw what came up. It did not matter what they saw first or in what order. Everything was mixed up. Updates from friends appeared between breaking news in the world. They were all referred to as "latest happenings," and categories like political news, social news, medical news and any other news were irrelevant if not non-existent.

Probing further, the researcher asked if they followed accounts of certain news organizations on Instagram or YouTube. Other than a few who could actually name the one or two news organizations they followed, most were not sure whether they had done so. They just saw news updates coming up from time to time. They did not know, or rather, were not keen to know, where the news came from. They saw, noted, and moved on. Two respondents exchanged their views about news on Instagram.

Boy 1: I mainly use IG to keep informed. I did subscribe to *Ming Pao* but there were too many words and I did not want to read. (How to read news on IG?) There are notifications from time to time. I will read if I happen to see them popping up.

Boy 2: I also use IG. Sometimes people will talk about it, then I will know. (School 5, senior secondary students)

Whatever news they saw, they came by randomly and unexpectedly. News consumption was not only passive but serendipitous. Seeing some news or not, it was all a matter of chance: if you see it, you see it. If you don't see it now, you may see it later. If you don't see it at all, that's okay.

To Entertain. This attitude was also observed in the consumption of entertainment content. As with teenagers in previous generations, popular music and dramas remained major entertainment for respondents. The media content they spent most of their time on was readily available on YouTube. They visited YouTube regularly and they mainly watched two types of video: they subscribed to channels they were interested in and waited for updates, and they watched what was trending on YouTube, together with what YouTube suggested to them. They rarely searched for content they were not already familiar with. A few respondents recalled how they became interested in some music recommended by YouTube. They started looking for more information about similar music after the introduction from the platform.

Respondents described how they came across oldies they liked when their parents played music at home, and how they reached out to productions from other cultural contexts when they randomly browsed content in social media. There were indeed fewer constraints imposed by time and space in terms of access to diverse content. But what would motivate the young ones to take part in the discovery process in the first place?

Various goals were mentioned. To kill time, to have fun, to keep up with the latest trends among friends. It seems that the two most used applications, Instagram and YouTube, could always meet their needs. Three respondents talked about how they made, or rather not, their entertainment choices.

> I once watched videos by some YouTubers from Taiwan. I didn't do it on purpose, but since then, they recommended similar channels to me. It was how I started following many and they are quite inspiring. (School 3, female junior secondary student)

> I found ASMR on YouTube. It is quite fun to watch other people making sounds while eating. (School 3, female junior secondary student)

> I watch dramas or shows recommended by friends. We can then talk among friends afterwards. (School 10, female senior secondary student)

As with the attitude toward news and information, although the goal to get entertainment was clear, the approaches remained casual and arbitrary.

To Socialize. All respondents agreed that they were heavy users of social media. Again, Instagram was used most

frequently. It was perceived to be addictive, comprehensive, and unmissable.

> Once you start scrolling IG, you keep scrolling. Just cannot do other things! (Don't you want it?) Not at all, but if I don't use it, I am worried that I will miss messages from others. (They are not urgent matters though?) No, but you know, some people delete messages if you do not reply right away. It keeps me wondering what I have missed, and sometimes my classmates do need to find me urgently. (School 3, female junior secondary student)

> IG is everything. You find all the information you need, and you see what your friends are doing. You feel that you are part of their lives somehow. (School 4, male junior secondary student)

> You feel obliged to be there. Because you choose to be on social media, you should make yourself available to others. Otherwise they cannot find you and you will miss out on something, too. (School 7, male senior secondary student)

Nonetheless, quite a few students expressed their reluctance to stay in constant touch with others.

> I don't read or reply. I just don't click into the messages. (Will you feel bad about ignoring messages?) It depends who is sending them. (School 7, male senior secondary student)

> I have a bad habit. I don't read messages. I can see from notifications on the menu. If there is no urgency, I will ignore it. I don't want to start chatting as it might become endless loops. (School 10, female senior secondary student)

Unlike getting information and entertainment in a one-way manner, sociality is inherently two-way and hence both participation and active non-participation are more visible. Generally speaking, it was observed that respondents in this study were very used to managing their various personal relationships through different applications. They navigated between WhatsApp, Signals, WeChat, and Discord with different groups and changing topics. They took notably more active roles in initiating and maintaining conversations. For those who avoided constant contact with others, they admitted that they were always informed by the notifications and were fully aware of what was happening. They would respond only when it was really necessary. Out of the 67 respondents in this study, two male respondents said that they had uninstalled the apps and claimed that they would rather meet face-to-face than rely on social media.

In summary, young people in this study frequently visited the media fields constituted by devices and applications, and took part in diverse activities to meet three main goals. The goals of staying informed and being entertained were clear, but the ways the respondents engaged in related activities were characterized by randomness and passivity. Comparatively, when using media to stay in touch with different groups, they exercised more agency when deciding if they would or would not participate in maintaining sociality, although fear of missing out (FOMO) was also notable.

Actors: Privileged or Non-Privileged?

In this section, we considered the major actors in the youth media participation. In this study, young people were certainly the most visible actors. Taking into account the less visible actors and their relations with the young helps to highlight the unequal resources and privileges of different actors, and hence sheds light on our core concern of power imbalances.

Parents. In view of power imbalances, it appeared that the young were clearly the less privileged ones in relation to their parents. First, they relied on their parents to provide them with the digital devices and subscription plans. Second, it was found in this study that some parents did impose certain restrictions on their use. For example, approval had to be sought when the young wanted to download certain applications. Time limits were set for the use of devices, and devices were taken away in some cases.

> (You mean you have to ask for consent from parents before downloading applications?)

> Yes. (Is it a special case or is it common?) I know some others in similar situations too. I think it is fine. I don't have much self-control. (School 1, male senior secondary student)

While regulatory practices varied, it was clear that parents were almost always the ones who set the rules.

> Girl 1: My mother used to take my phone away at night. I could take it for a look in the morning and after I came home from school.
> Boy 1: Mine is not so strict. But at least you have to finish your homework before taking the phone out. (School 2, junior secondary students)
> Girl 1: My mother will keep my phone when I sleep.
> Girl 2: My dad will take it away too.
> Girl 3: They let me keep it but I have to shut it down.
> Boy 1: My mom takes it to her room.
> Boy 2: I just put it somewhere away from my bed.
> Boy 3: I put it under my pillow. (School 4, junior secondary students)

It was noteworthy that such monitoring from parents was mainly found among junior students. Despite the control, resentment on the side of the young ones was not discerned.

Platforms and Media Organizations. Media organizations behind social media platforms and applications are important actors, for they are the ones formulating the fields that users

keep returning to. Users have to give explicit consent to the terms and agreements. End-user license agreements are often lengthy and hard to understand. As such, all our respondents confirmed that they just agreed automatically.

Here, the media corporations were the privileged actors setting barriers to participation. Users, regardless of age, could only take it or leave it. It should not be surprising that all our respondents took it rather than left it, but not without some sort of resistance.

> There are many online games which keep asking you to complete various tasks. It is quite tedious but they will keep making you do these things so that they have more visitors. I will create an account just to do these things. In this case, I won't leave too many digital footprints. (School 5, female senior secondary student)

Opening more accounts was indeed a common practice among the young. Most female respondents, both junior and secondary students, had more than one Instagram account. One 15-year-old girl said she had eight, while most had two to four, each serving different groups and purposes. Generally speaking, there was one for the public, one or two for selected contacts, and one entirely for oneself. Rather than resisting media organizations, however, this practice reflected a major decision the youths made in their digital life. We will return to this in the next section about decision-making.

Content Providers. Finally, there was a group of actors who actively produced and shared content. Dubbed KOL, social influencers, micro-celebrities, it was not clear who they were exactly or the actual size of this growing fleet. It was clear, however, that our respondents often "automatically" followed or subscribed to whoever they found interesting at first sight so that they would get updates. They might develop a long-term interest in some channels while losing interest in many more over time. Some respondents also subscribed to traditional media outlets like BBC News and major local newspapers, yet they were treated as just another "useful source." In other words, their information environment was filled with content produced by a wide array of individuals and organizations. No one ever mentioned credibility or trustworthiness in this study. Instead, the young were concerned about whether analysis was provided. A few senior secondary students discussed the merit of informational YouTubers.

> Girl 1: Information is truly overloaded now. When there is so much out there, you don't know what to read.
> Girl 2: I feel the same. It is hard to follow so many. I just wait for other people to update me.
> Girl 1: I watch more of those informational YouTubers. They provide more background information and analyze views from different stakeholders. They also discuss the impact of the news. It is more helpful than just seeing headlines in fragments. (School 10, female senior secondary students)

Similar remarks were made about entertainment content.

> I like to watch dramas but sometimes they are really too long. I will go find interpretational videos to watch instead. The YouTubers will introduce the key plots. Then they will analyse the underlying messages of the story, and various storytelling techniques involved. I prefer this way. It is also good that they will compare the story with what is happening in the real world. (School 9, female senior secondary student)

As audiences, youths did subscribe to diverse content providers yet would passively wait for updates. Almost none had ever posted any response to the content they read and watched. They remained passive audiences despite interactivity being encouraged and emphasized by different content providers. In this regard, youths took a predominantly passive, if not non-privileged, position in the participatory processes with their parents, media organizations and other online actors.

Decision-Making Moments

The findings strongly suggested that passive and random digital participation characterized youths' media use. It was particularly noteworthy when they did take initiatives and exercise agency. This section examines four scenarios when the young made active decisions regarding their participation.

"I Google It.". There was an abundance of information on the social media feeds. Our respondents were used to receiving news from both local sources and around the globe, and updates from friends, family and numerous content providers. Most relied on what they came across when they refreshed their Instagram. On a few rare occasions, they felt compelled to take further action.

> These days I keep seeing news about Russia and Ukraine. I see a lot but I still don't know what is actually happening. So I Google it. (School 7, male senior secondary student)

> I want to know more about COVID, so I Google it. (School 6, male junior secondary student)

Google was seen as the handiest tool for further information. Despite it providing a great deal of convenience, it was not used unless the young ones felt really confused or curious. When motivated enough, they would type in a keyword search in Google and often felt satisfied after checking out the first few results.

"I've Had Enough of It.". Similar to information, entertainment of all sorts was in constant supply. Nonetheless, there were moments when the young felt utterly bored.

> I feel like vomiting when I keep refreshing my feed and see content being repeated. I feel really bored. (School 10, female senior secondary student)

In response, some would ask for opinions from friends and family on content that was good and fun. Some decided that they should leave the media for a while and went to meet "real people" instead. A 14-year-old boy made an intriguing remark:

> I felt so bored when school was suspended. There is nothing to see online! So I decided to learn something new. I am learning guitar and planting. There is so much more fun. (How did you learn?) Watching tutorials on YouTube. (So you are still online.) Yes, but for a clear purpose. (School 6, male junior secondary student)

There was a strong awareness that one should not spend too much time online. Yet, as shown in this quote above, they could not really leave a digital life that has become so mundane and natural. Some had tried to leave by putting their devices out of sight or setting a quota for use time. A student had tried this:

> For a while, I logged out from IG every time I used it. So the next time when you want to browse IG, you have to log in again. (How was it?) The effects did not last long. I tried this practice on my computer. Too troublesome, so I just browse on my phone now. (School 7, male senior secondary student)

When the young felt that they had had enough, they made conscious attempts to restrict their use and often failed. The experience of one girl was illuminating.

> Once the Wi-Fi at home was broken. My mother decided not to fix it. She did not want me to go online so often. Back then I was really like, I need to be online! Turned out I asked my neighbours to share their Wi-Fi passwords with me. (How did you ask?) I told them I had to do homework. (School 3, female junior secondary student).

"No Comment.". Most students in this study said that they remained onlookers on social media most of the time. They constantly opened Instagram, for example, and "looped" content for hours. They "hearted" posts from friends from time to time. It was the most enthusiastic action they took, however. Among the 67 participants, only a few of them had ever left comments. Most adopted a "read-only" approach. To some, they simply did not have anything to say. For those who did have opinions, they were hesitant to leave comments that would be made visible to others. After second thoughts, they would rather not get into any potential disagreements with other people.

Notwithstanding their voluntary withdrawal from discussion, the participants could see comments from other people and did spend time reading them. While some were from people they knew in real life, most comments were written by people they did not know in person. Commenting on these comments, they found it both amusing and mind-blowing.

> I was like, ahh, that's how some people think about it! (Do you share the same views?) Not at all. (But you choose not to share your views. Do you think it is a pity somehow that others don't get views from other people too, like yours?) It is okay. I know what I am thinking and I have my own views and position. I know what I read online is not the full picture. That's enough. (School 7, male senior secondary student)

Similar views were repeated across the 10 focus groups. It clearly showed a conscious decision not to take part in a participatory culture that was increasingly taken to be the norm. In other words, they knew that they were supposed to share freely in the social media environment. Without regret, they chose not to engage, or to be engaged, this way.

"Private Or Public?." It is important to note that young people did share content with their friends and family. Instead of sharing such content in their own feed, they would copy and paste links and forward to close contacts. In this case, their activities were only visible to people they chose. This is one of the strategies that showed how the youths managed private and public boundaries.

As discussed earlier, most girls in this study managed several Instagram accounts. Content was tailor-made for each account. They felt that they could share genuine feelings and snapshots with close friends. The public account, however, was used to follow as many accounts as possible. It was used for casual navigation. The private account was used to record moments that would be archived for future viewing. This account was kept strictly private.

Another common strategy these students adopted was to make careful distinctions between "story" and "post." Most informants said they rarely published posts on Instagram, except on very special occasions. They preferred to post a "story" that would disappear 24 hr after being posted. They considered it a much better and carefree way to enjoy the fun of the app.

Similar remarks to these came up in different group discussions. "I don't need it to stay in my feed forever." "It doesn't matter if other people react or comment on my story. It will be gone anyway. It is only for me to review in the future."

These strategies enabled the youths to define their private, semi-private and public spaces. Each space served a different purpose. Interestingly, the most active form of participation took place in the solely private space, while in the public space participation was minimal.

Participation Intensities and Power Imbalances. By considering the fields, actors and decision-making moments in participation, we have tried to unpack the participation processes. Taking valence and intensity of participation into account (Casemajor et al., 2015), Table 1 highlights the most salient form of participation in the processes, which further sensitize us to the power imbalances in different aspects.

Table 1. Patterns of Participatory Intensities.

	Active participation	Passive participation	Active non-participation	Passive non-participation
The fields				
Devices and apps		✓		
Goals				
To inform		✓		
To entertain		✓		
To socialize	✓	✓	✓	✓
Actors				
Parents		✓		
Platforms and media organizations		✓		
Content providers		✓	✓	
Decision-making moments				
"I Google it"	✓			
"I've had enough"	✓			
"No comments"			✓	
"Private or public?"	✓			

To participate, the young had to enter the fields. This marked the first instance of passive participation as they had to rely on adults to provide them with the digital devices. Once in the fields, they participated to meet different goals. The random and serendipitous approaches in getting information and entertainment suggested a dominant pattern of passive participation. Interestingly, when it came to sociality, there was not one single dominant form but a wider array of approaches.

Different actors participated in the fields. Parents monitored and regulated media use to varying degrees. Platforms and media organizations set the rules and the young signed end-user license agreements with little choice. In both cases, the young were the less privileged actors and hence were in a passive position. In view of relations with content providers in the fields, the young knew that they could interact with them through liking or leaving comments, yet in practice they rarely did so. This was either because they did not have the motivation and would rather just consume the content (passive participation), or because they were aware of potential risks and so they consciously avoided engaging in interaction (active non-participation). Either way, they remained passive onlookers in the fields.

It should be noted that the young were not always the less privileged participants. After all, the media fields they were familiar with were designed as such that participation was assumed and encouraged. The young were found to be at greater ease when they were interacting with friends and family in a private setting. Still, some were reluctant to respond proactively to the need for constant communication and opted for more passive participation.

Finally, we reviewed a few major decisions the young made in their daily participation. Given that they consciously made these decisions, they were bound to be active in nature. However, as shown in the table, while three were classified as active participation, one was deemed as active non-participation. It is noteworthy that compared with this practice of setting private and public boundaries, which was commonly found among all respondents, the other three activities were much more infrequent. In other words, although the young can always actively participate in seeking information and entertainment, they rarely do so unless they are strongly motivated.

The dominant recurring patterns of passive participation, together with the less privileged positions the young take, strongly suggest that there are indeed remarkable power imbalances. The imbalances are found in the fields and among various actors. Except for a few occasions when the young did demonstrate stronger agency, they appeared to be on the weak side in the power relationships and showed little motivation to address such imbalances.

Implications for Participatory Culture

Our findings have provided clues for a portrait of a Hong Kong youth who, like teenagers from previous generations, remains a heavy media user. He or she spends hours and hours each day browsing updates and content from Instagram and YouTube, while relying on different messenger apps to socialize with friends and family. Though familiar with the settings in social media which encourage interaction, he or she avoids taking part in such activities. When he or she does react, make a comment or share an update, clear boundaries are set so that his or her digital activities are only visible to selected people.

This profile draws attention to three core issues concerning participation.

Architecture of Passive Participation. Audiences play an integral and substantial part in the architecture of participation.

Whether content is produced by professional media or other users, it needs to be consumed. The number of views provides a useful indicator for producers to evaluate the performance of their work. It also suggests which works are trending and are receiving greater audience attention. As audiences, young people in this study are certainly spending a lot of time on Instagram and YouTube for information and entertainment. They are adding to the number of views as unique visitors. They are actively taking part in viewing. This form of participation, despite being passive, is both valuable and vital to the continued existence of various platforms and media organizations. Passive participation is hence the foundation of increasingly mundane digital and online participation.

The findings also portray how youths' media use in Hong Kong is characterized by a strong sense of serendipity. Most respondents were easy-going with what they came across in their navigation on social media platforms. They constantly refreshed the feed and just followed the flow. If they saw some breaking news, it was fine. If they did not see it on time, it was also fine. No one in this study actively sought out news except when they were really curious. The wait-and-see attitude lent dominance to other people's choices, especially those who actively posted and reposted, as well as algorithms set by the platforms. Most young people said that they did understand such trends but they were not bothered. They would rather let their consumption of information and entertainment be determined by chance and other active users in this "architecture of passive participation."

Civic or Private Participation. In earlier discussions of the participatory culture, participation was often deemed desirable as it was linked first to civic and democratic participation, and, second, to the assumption that sociality and interaction is beneficial to communities. In this study, young people were fully aware of the features that encouraged them to participate. However, they opted to stay as onlookers. They knew what other people were debating or even fighting over in public discussions; they read and followed comments. They might have their own views but they would not share with people they did not know well. There was a sharp awareness regarding the visibility and durability of their activities. This became even more acute after Hong Kong went through drastic political and societal changes after 2019. They felt more secure just watching and letting it go. In this sense, it would be inaccurate to say that they were not taking part in discussions. They did show interest and they were hardly missing out on the hot topics of the day. This form of participation is both active and passive. They actively watched how others engaged while voluntarily silencing themselves, leading to a more dominant form of passive participation.

The findings show that young people were most at ease when they were interacting with friends and family. In other words, they knew exactly who their audiences were so that they did not have to worry about unintended consequences of their activities. They created different accounts for different groups and shared customized content with each of them. The use of "story" but not "post" also set a time limit. The story would expire in 24 hr, so any reactions and interactions took place within a prescribed time frame. This form of participation is active but closed and limited.

While it is understandable that one needs to feel safe to participate in any activity, the tendency of our respondents to make sure that they did not make any mistakes in communication is alarming. It not only leads to such phenomena as echo chambers and filter bubbles, but also cultivates a habit of self-surveillance in the long run. With little civic participation and more private participation, the hopes to build a more civic and democratic society through participation are likely to remain unfulfilled.

Participation Gap. In this study, the majority of respondents were not actively participating in the digital world in the traditional sense. Nonetheless, there was an endless stream of content for them to participate as audience and onlookers. However, there are bound to be other people who take far more active roles from the supply side. In other words, there has always been uneven participation and hence power imbalances. Jenkins et al. (2009) had warned of a participation gap in the new media environment. Such a participation gap is evident here. It prompts one to ask: who is benefited and who will be disadvantaged with this widening gap? Should we be concerned about varying participation intensities and ensuing power imbalances? Why does it matter? These questions are crucial in a participatory culture wherein the young are voluntarily taking up marginal positions and show little interest in addressing the power imbalances either in the media or through the media.

Conclusion

Back in the early 1990s, young people diving into the internet were experiencing innovations in a markedly different sense. For young people today, those innovations are part of everyday life. They are ordinary, mundane, and largely taken for granted. This study was premised on these latest developments and questioned how such mundane participation should be conceptualized and what emerging issues should be attended to.

The research analyzed processes in mundane participation through the framework proposed by Carpentier (2011, 2016). Our findings showed consistent passive participation in youth media use, which greatly benefited platforms and media organizations in maintaining active traffic and hence business, while allowing all sorts of content providers to inhabit the youths' information and entertainment environments. The young knew about these mechanisms, just as they knew they were monitored by their parents one way or another. However, there was little resentment or resistance. In other words, power imbalances were loud and clear, but the users were not only indifferent but

showed a tendency to practice self-surveillance in the participatory culture.

This study is not based on a representative sample and is not meant to be generalizable to the whole population. Besides, drawing on insights from research in political participation, it has limited the focus to "power." There are certainly other equally important factors shaping youth mediated participation, which are not discussed here. Despite these limitations, it strives to provide an updated and renewed account of mundane participation. The findings should inform further research regarding other aspects of youth media use and mundane participation.

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