



# Social media use and university students' participation in a large-scale protest campaign: The case of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 March 2016

Received in revised form 4 July 2016

Accepted 9 August 2016

Available online 10 August 2016

### Keywords:

Social media

Protest participation

Support generation vs. behavior activation

Digital participation

Connective action

Umbrella Movement

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of social media use on participation in large-scale protest campaigns that feature a range of participation opportunities. It develops a theoretical model which distinguishes between support generation and behavior activation effects, differentiates collective action, digital, and personalized action participation, and posits social media use as a mediator between social psychological predictors of protest behavior and actual participation. The empirical analysis focuses on Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014. Analyzing a probability sample of university students (N = 795), the findings show that sharing political information and direct connections with political actors via social media have significant impact on both support for and participation in the Umbrella Movement. Social media use has effects on each dependent variable in the causal chain even after all the immediate causes are controlled. Social media use also mediates part of the impact of general political awareness, efficacy, and grievances on movement support and participation.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of digital and social media in contemporary protest movements has attracted much media and academic attention because of a wave of large-scale protests around the world since 2010, including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados, and more recently, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. Despite debates about whether digital media were a "cause" of these protests (Olorunnisola and Martin, 2014), few would contest the claim that digital media played an important role in their coordination, communication, and mobilization (e.g., Bennett et al., 2014; Brym et al., 2014; Tremayne, 2014). Meanwhile, research in the media effects tradition has also repeatedly demonstrated the impact of social media use on protest participation (e.g., Macafee and De Simone, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

This study contributes to the literature on social media and protest participation in two main ways. First, past research has focused mainly on the direct impact of social media use on participation without considering whether social media could

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shape attitudes toward specific movements in the first place. Distinguishing between support generation and behavior activation effects, this article examines if social media could generate participation both directly and indirectly. Second, with the rise of new forms or logics of social movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012), “participation” has taken up varying meanings (Lee and Chan, 2016). This study differentiates among collective action participation, digital participation, and personalized action participation, which could co-exist in a large-scale protest campaign. It examines if social media could enhance varying forms of participation.

Moreover, borrowing the insights from the communication mediation model (Sotirovic and McLeod, 2001), this study analyzes the possibility that social media use could mediate the influence of other social psychological predictors on protest participation. Combined together, this study examines an elaborated and integrative model on how social media use influences participation in a protest movement. The empirical study focuses on the case of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, and specifically on university students’ participation. The next sections explicate the conceptual arguments underlying our theoretical model and provide the background of the Umbrella Movement. The method will then be explicated, and the data analysis and findings will be presented.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual building blocks

### 2.1. Social media use and protest participation

Social media use can promote protest or political participation in general for several reasons (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Social media are a source of news that is often recommended by trusted friends and acquaintances. Social media constitute a space of expression and deliberation (Macafee and De Simone, 2012). When expressing themselves and/or discussing with others, people process relevant information and messages more deeply and become more likely to be influenced (Nekmat, 2012).

For protests, interactions through social media can lead to the formation of oppositional identities (McGarty et al., 2014) and the accumulation of social capital (Warren et al., 2015). To the extent that the mainstream media have a pro-establishment bias (Gitlin, 1980; Boykoff, 2006), people are more likely to encounter pro-movement messages online, especially through Internet alternative media (Forde, 2011; Leung and Lee, 2014). People can even connect directly with activists via social media sites. Calls to actions can spread quickly from the activists to the sympathetic networked publics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Underlying the above arguments are two distinctive possibilities of how social media can generate protest participation. The first can be called support generation. By connecting with movement groups and activists, encountering pro-movement messages, and discussing with pro-movement friends, people may come to agree with the goal or ideology of a protest movement and develop a stronger awareness of existing injustices (Lee et al., 2015; Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015). Hence social media use may lead to participation through generating attitudinal support.

However, not all movement sympathizers make the efforts and, in some cases, take the risks to join collective actions (Brym et al., 2014). Given attitudinal support, participation may be triggered only when one receives information about the actions, encounters a call for action, or sees an outrageous image that elicits anger. As social media constitute an arena for the dissemination of such information and images, social media use may also have a behavior activation effect. It may generate participation even after attitude is taken into account.

The distinction between support generation and behavior activation is not established in the literature. Part of the reason is that existing studies often focus on the impact of social media on protest behavior in general, instead of the participation in a specific protest (e.g., Tang and Lee, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013). When protest in general is concerned, attitudinal support is not a meaningful category. However, when participation in a specific protest is concerned, distinguishing between attitudinal and behavioral support is useful. It would allow us to discern the possibility that social media use can lead to protest participation both directly through behavior activation and indirectly through support generation.

### 2.2. Meanings of participation in new forms of social movements

Earl and Kimport (2011) argued that digital media could have both “supersize effects” and “theory 2.0 effects” on social movements. The former refers to how digital media facilitate more powerful and efficient mobilization. The latter refers to how the affordances of digital media may lead to new forms of social movements. Castells (2012) saw the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) as exemplars of “networked social movements”, whereas Bennett and Segerberg (2013) theorized the logic of connective actions.

Both Castells’ (2012) and Bennett and Segerberg’s (2013) conceptualizations point to the dispersed, decentralized, and hybrid character of the actions in contemporary large-scale protest movements. In a conventional collective action, people gather in the same time and place and carry out a more or less standardized action. But in cases such as OWS and the Umbrella Movement, people engaged in both the collective action of public space occupation and a diverse range of personalized or small-group based actions. For example, in the Umbrella Movement, the occupiers engaged in public art creation, attended “civic seminars”, joined deliberation of the movement’s direction, and participated in frontline actions such as setting up road blockades and confronting the police, etc., (Au, 2015; Lee and Chan, 2016).

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