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Social media and mental health in democracy movement in Hong Kong: A population-based study



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ABSTRACT

Social media use has proliferated in the past ten years and studies are beginning to investigate the associations of social media use with political movements and mental health. This study extends this literature by testing a novel hypothesis that social resource loss on social media (e.g., “unfriending”) may be associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in social upheaval. A population-based sample of 1,208 Chinese Hong Kong citizens (mean age = 46.89; 52.4% female) was recruited by random digit dialing in February 2015, two months after the conclusion of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Respondents reported social resource loss on social media, and anxiety and depressive symptoms. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that social resource loss on social media was positively associated with depressive symptoms but not anxiety symptoms. Age moderated the positive association between social resource loss on social media and depressive symptoms. Simple slope tests revealed that the association was significant only among middle-aged (39–55 years) and older (≥ 56 years) adults but not younger (18–38 years) adults. The current findings shed light on the role of social media in mental health during political movements across different age groups.

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1. Introduction

Social media plays an increasingly important role in social and political movements. Social media is often used to seek politically-related news or information (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). It is also involved in shaping political movements. For example, picture sharing and status updates on Facebook were instrumental for mobilizing the Occupy Wall Street movement because these allowed for rapid dissemination of related information (Gaby & Caren, 2012). Online discussions/debates and dissemination/receipt of information through social media (i.e.,

Facebook and Twitter) were also implicated in the development of the Arab Spring and the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Khondker, 2011). Likewise, social media most recently provided a platform for updates, opinions, and rallying points for participations in the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Chen & Reese, 2015). Even though the usage of social media sites differs in different age groups, Facebook served as one of the primary vehicles for news especially during the Umbrella Movement (Tsui, 2015).

The Umbrella Movement, originally called “Occupy Central”, emerged between September 28th and December 15th, 2014 in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Hong Kong citizens blocked traffic at three major business/administrative districts by building encampments that were occupied for nearly three months. An estimated 20.1% of the 7.2 million citizens reported having

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stayed in the occupied areas ([The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2014](#)). Due to the fact that “universal suffrage” was made ambiguous by granting Hong Kong citizens the right to vote and the right to be elected but not the right to nominate candidates, the Umbrella Movement encouraged spirited debate and polarized opinions that may have disrupted social harmony.

The ambiguity could increase the chance of political disagreement, while debate and exchange of opinions could take place both face-to-face and on social media. Among 569 protestors (age = 18–40 years) in the occupied areas in November 2014, the majority (80%) reported debating with acquaintances and friends who were opposed to the Umbrella Movement on Facebook and mobile chat groups and 30% did so frequently. Approximately 30% of the respondents reported having experiences of “unfriending” with acquaintances or friends on Facebook due to opposing political viewpoints ([Lee & Chan, 2015](#)). Given that the literature points to an association between losses of social resources and poor mental health ([Hall, Bonanno, Bolton, & Bass, 2014](#); [Hall, Murray, Galea, Canetti, & Hobfoll, 2015](#); [Hou, 2010](#)), we might expect this association following social upheaval. Although people may disagree about political issues and end an online friendship, this may be an emotionally painful loss. However, no previous study has linked this “unfriending” behavior with mental health outcomes.

Social media use has pronounced effects on mental health. Facebook has been used to gain bridging social capital (i.e., fragile connections with heterogeneous groups that foster social inclusion) and maintain both close and long-distance social bonding ([Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007](#)). The intensity of Facebook use and the number of Facebook friends was associated with higher life satisfaction and subjective happiness respectively among different samples of American college students ($n = 391$; $n = 2,603$) ([Kim & Lee, 2011](#); [Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009](#)). Facebook network size was positively associated with estimated audience for status updates which, in turn, predicted higher life satisfaction ([Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012](#)). Among 401 college Facebook users in the United States, Facebook network size was associated with higher levels of perceived social support, contributing in turn to higher life satisfaction ([Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013](#)). Valence (positive/negative) of others' reactions on profiles was positively associated with life satisfaction indirectly through increasing or decreasing self-esteem among adolescents in the Netherlands ([Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006](#)). Perceived social connectedness derived from the use of Facebook was inversely associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms and positively associated with life satisfaction among 274 college students in Australia ([Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013](#)). Research has yet to evaluate the association between social media use and mental health in non-college student, community samples.

It remains unclear whether and how social media use is associated with mental health during social upheaval. Social network could be a platform for social resource loss during the Umbrella Movement, which could adversely impact mental health among the affected population. According to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, resource loss is the underlying mechanism driving poor adaptation to stressful events ([Hobfoll, 1998](#)). Resources broadly include those personal, social, and material resources that we centrally value and are often divided between internal and external resources ([Hobfoll, 1998](#)). Despite the possibility that social protests could create passageways for increased political resources ([Hobfoll, 2012](#)), that is, democracy and universal suffrage in the case of the Umbrella Movement, they also have the power of depleting personal (i.e., perceived control and optimism) and social

(i.e., relationship intimacy and connectedness) resources, which have a central impact on the citizens' mental health. Preventing depletion of these resources is key to maintaining healthy functioning ([Hobfoll, 1998](#); [Hobfoll et al., 2009](#); [Hou & Lam, 2014](#); [Hou, Law, & Fu, 2010a](#); [Hou, Law, Yin, & Fu, 2010b](#); [Hou, Ng, & Wan, 2014](#); [Hou et al., 2015](#)). General losses of social resources has been found to be associated with increased risk of higher depressive symptoms two months after the conclusion of the Umbrella Movement ([Hou et al., 2015](#)).

Different age groups engage with social media differently. The number of young (i.e., 18–29 years old) social networking sites users is still expanding in the United States, and there is a rapid increase in social networking sites use among respondents between 30 and 49 years of age (from 48% to 78%), between 50 and 64 years of age (from 25% to 60%), and 65 years or above (from 13% to 43%) ([Brenner & Smith, 2013](#); [Madden & Zickuhr, 2011](#)). Socio-emotional selectivity theory suggests that social networks could be distinctly different between younger and older adults. Individuals tend to devote more emotional resources to close social partners rather than expanding peripheral social relationships as they age — decrease in social contact is considered a natural, adaptive aging process ([Carstensen, 1993, 1995](#)). Older adults tend to be more satisfied with their current network size and are also less likely to add people to their existing network compared with younger counterparts ([Lansford, Sherman, & Antonucci, 1998](#)). For instance, older adults maintain a small social network with close social partners whereas younger adults maintain and expand their social network to include both acquaintances and more distant friends. In addition, there could also be an age-related advantage of psychological resilience during social upheaval. Among 2,752 respondents in New York City, a random-digit-dialing telephone survey revealed that individuals aged 65 years or above were three times more likely to be resilient, i.e., did not demonstrate clinically significant psychological distress, than those aged 18–24 years after the September 11 terrorist attack ([Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007](#)). Younger Holocaust survivors reported higher Post-traumatic Stress Disorder symptomology and distress levels compared with the older ones ([Dekel & Hobfoll, 2007](#)). Age was also found to be inversely associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms among a population-representative sample two months after the conclusion of the Umbrella Movement ([Hou et al., 2015](#)). Taken together, these trends in social media use and age-related social network size and mental health, justifies an investigation into the modifying effect of age in the association between social media and mental health.

The present study aims to investigate (1) the association between social resource loss on social media and anxiety and depressive symptoms, and (2) whether the association between social resource loss on social media and anxiety and depressive symptoms was moderated by age in a population-representative sample of Hong Kong citizens two months after the conclusion of the Umbrella Movement. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. Social resource loss on social media will be positively associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms, controlling for demographic characteristics and general social resource loss (i.e., not specific to social media loss).

Hypothesis 2. The positive association between social resource loss on social media and anxiety and depressive symptoms will be moderated by age, controlling for demographics and general social resource loss. The positive association between social resource loss on social media and anxiety and depressive symptoms will be stronger among younger respondents relative to older respondents.

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