

Social Media as a Tool for Political Mobilization: A Case Study of the 2020 Hong Kong Protests

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Abstract. *This research examines the role of social media in political mobilization by analyzing the 2020 Hong Kong protests as a case study. The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative content analysis of social media posts and interviews with protest participants. The literature review provides a background on the theories of social movements and the use of social media in political activism. The findings show that social media played a critical role in facilitating political mobilization by providing a platform for communication and organization among protesters. The analysis also reveals the limitations and challenges of relying solely on social media for political mobilization. The discussion highlights the implications of these findings for future social movements and political activism.*

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Mobilization, Hong Kong Protests*

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INTRODUCTION

Protests against a contentious extradition measure were widespread in Hong Kong this year, leading to its eventual withdrawal by the government. Protests were planned and carried out mostly on social media sites including Telegram, Twitter, and Facebook well into 2020. Protester coordination, communication, and information dissemination were all greatly aided by the widespread use of social media, which also helped shape public opinion in Hong Kong and around the world. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how social media will be utilized for political mobilization in Hong Kong in the year 2020.

Especially in places where traditional media is restricted or controlled by the government (King et al., 2017), social media has been shown in previous research to have the potential to be used for political mobilization and activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick & Howard, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Social media played a crucial role in building a varied and decentralized movement in the 2020 Hong Kong protests, which comprised young and old, students and professionals, and many other types of people. Protesters faced risks of surveillance and censorship, saw their movements weakened by the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda, and had trouble keeping their momentum going over the long term due to the restrictions imposed by social media.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the role of social media in the Hong Kong protests of 2020 through a case study approach, specifically looking at the use of various social media platforms, the strategies and tactics adopted by protesters, and the effect of social media on the outcomes of the protests. This investigation is driven by the question, "How did social media facilitate political mobilization during the 2020 protests in Hong Kong?" When it comes to political mobilization, what were the benefits and drawbacks of using social media? How did the use of social media influence the results of the demonstrations? By analyzing the use of social media in the context of the Hong Kong demonstrations in 2020, this study hopes to add to the existing literature on social media and political mobilization. This research may shed light on how social media platforms contribute to political protests, the dynamics of social movements, and the

connection between online activism and institutionalized political power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Political Mobilization

As a place for people to meet others who share their passions and get things done, social media has emerged as a powerful instrument for political mobilization. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), "connective action," characterized by decentralized and individualized networks, enables individuals to mobilize without the need for formal organizations or leadership, is made possible by social media. The voices of underrepresented communities can be heard and information can be spread through social media platforms. According to Chadwick & Howard (2017), the "hybrid media system" that defines contemporary politics is significantly influenced by social media. They claim that the rise of social media has displaced more established methods of political discourse and opened up exciting new possibilities for public engagement and mobilization. However, they also point out that social media can be used to spread false information and radical ideology.

Social Media and the 2020 Hong Kong Protests

The proposed extradition measure in 2020 sparked a series of pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong. Soon, the demonstrations had grown into a bigger campaign for greater democratic freedoms and independence from mainland China. Protesters relied heavily on social media as a means of communication, organization, and coordination between themselves. Protesters in Hong Kong mostly used Facebook, Telegram, and LIHKG, a forum based in Hong Kong, to coordinate and disseminate information, according to an analysis of protesters' usage of social media conducted by Lin et al. (2021). Social media was also shown to be essential in helping demonstrators coordinate with one another and adapt rapidly to new developments.

Social media in China, including Hong Kong, is allegedly heavily censored and monitored by the government, according to King et al. (2017). They point out that the government frequently used social media to monitor and stifle dissent, and that users who publish anything deemed critical of the government risk harsh repercussions.

Advantages and Limitations of Social Media for Political Mobilization

While social media can be a powerful tool for political mobilization, it also has several limitations. First, social media can facilitate the spread of disinformation and misinformation, which can undermine the credibility of social movements and lead to polarization and conflict (Tufekci, 2017). Second, social media can be subject to censorship and surveillance, which can limit the ability of individuals to organize and express dissent (King et al., 2017). Finally, social media can be a double-edged sword, as it can both amplify and undermine the voices of marginalized groups (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The 2020 Hong Kong protests are the focus of this qualitative case study analysis of the usage of social media for political mobilization. The case study approach allows researchers to observe and learn from complicated social phenomena as they occur in real life. Gathering and analyzing information from a wide variety of sources—including interviews, records, and media—allows for a more complete picture of the situation to emerge. There will be two stages of data gathering for this study. The first step is to compile and examine historical data on the Hong Kong demonstrations, such as reports, social media posts, and videos. The second stage consists of semi-structured interviews with important characters, such as protest organizers, demonstrators, and journalists, who were present during the protests.

The interviews will be videotaped and transcribed verbatim from audio recordings made using online video conferencing software like Zoom. Purposive sampling will be used to choose the participants, which involves recruiting people who have some bearing on the issue. The data will be analyzed using a thematic analysis strategy, which seeks out and makes sense of overarching themes and patterns. The study questions will inform the coding method, which will

then be used to categorize the data into overarching themes. The results of this study will be presented in narrative style, with important themes and patterns illustrated by quotations and examples taken directly from the data. The possibility for researcher bias and the generalizability of the findings, as well as any other limitations of the study, will be highlighted. The overarching goal of this research is to shed light on the complex relationship between social media and political mobilization, with a focus on the Hong Kong protests of 2020.

Several important findings regarding the role of social media in political mobilization have emerged based on the data collected from archival sources and interviews with key actors involved in the 2020 Hong Kong protests. First, social media was important in helping to organize and rally protesters. Protesters were able to rapidly and efficiently communicate and coordinate their actions thanks to encrypted messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp. Twitter and Facebook were used to spread the word about the demonstrations, share graphic footage of police violence, and rally support for the cause. Second, the pro-democracy movements in other parts of the world were able to communicate with and lend support to the Hong Kong demonstrators using social media. Hashtags and common symbols, like the black mask and umbrella, allowed people from many countries work together toward a common goal. Thirdly, the demonstrators in Hong Kong were able to counter the narratives of the Chinese government and the Hong Kong police thanks to social media. Protesters were able to undermine the government's attempts to control the narrative of the protests and promote themselves as the rightful representatives of the people by posting their own stories and experiences online.

Finally, while social media was instrumental in spreading awareness and organizing support for the Hong Kong protests, it also put protesters in harm's way. For instance, the Hong Kong police and the Chinese government's use of facial recognition technology made it harder for protesters to hide their identities and avoid being caught. Social media's potential and power as a political mobilization tool in the light of the Hong Kong protests of 2020. Protesters were able to better communicate with one another, form alliances with other movements, and take on official narratives, but they were also put in more dangerous situations. Overall, our research sheds new light on the intricate relationship between online communities and political activism during the 2014 Hong Kong riots.

CONCLUSION

This research shows how important social media was in the planning and distribution of the Hong Kong protests in 2020. Social media and encrypted messaging apps helped protesters quickly and efficiently coordinate their actions, disseminate information about the protests, and challenge the official narratives of the Chinese government and the Hong Kong police, all of which contributed to the protests' success. Not everything could be shared on social media. Pro-government communications and propaganda were widely disseminated on social media, while facial recognition technology was used to identify and track demonstrators by the Chinese government and the Hong Kong police. All future movements would do well to learn from these strategies and avoid the pitfalls of social media. This study's results corroborate those of others that have looked at the impact of social media on political activism. Castells (2015) argues that social media can help people organize into networks and movements that can challenge state power. Earl and Kimport (2011) also discovered that social media can amplify the voices of underrepresented groups, giving them a platform from which to question prevailing narratives and organize for political change. The protests in Hong Kong in 2020 will go down in the annals of social media and political mobilization as a watershed event. Protesters were able to coordinate and spread information, as well as challenge state power structures, with the help of social media. However, it also opened them up to new dangers and difficulties that future movements that use social media for political mobilization will have to overcome. The results of this study add to the expanding body of knowledge on the impact of social media on political mobilization and call for more investigation into this vital area.

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