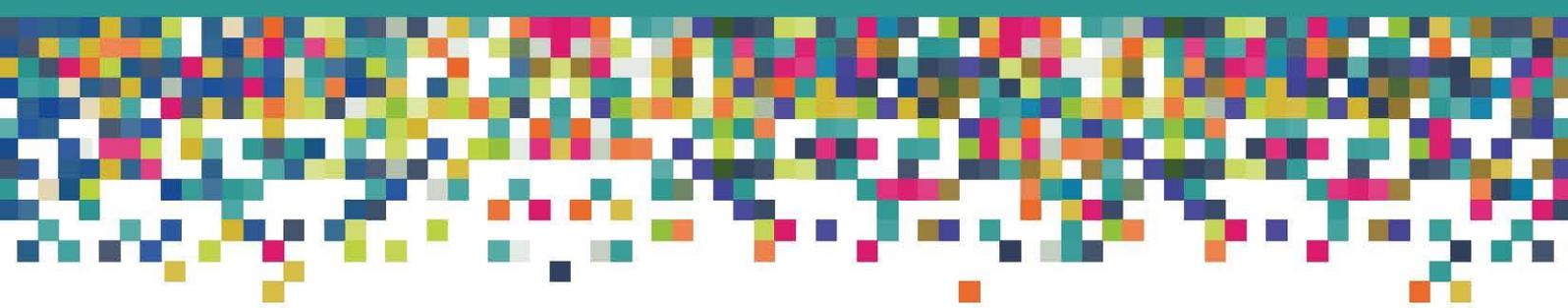




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## THE 'SILENT MAJORITY'

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Counter-Movement Key  
Opinion Leaders' YouTube Coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong  
Protests

**Limichi Okamoto**



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## Abstract

*This paper explores discursive strategies of counter-protesting Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in relation to their representation of the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill protests. Mass demonstrations were incited by the Hong Kong Government's proposed Extradition Bill that would have allowed it to surrender citizens to Mainland China. This evolved into a city-wide and militant-in-parts movement targeting political reforms and investigation into alleged police brutality. However, the protests also engendered a reactionary counter-movement claiming to be the 'silent majority' of Hong Kong citizens, visibly represented by KOLs on social media platforms such as YouTube. In this current moment of abeyance due to the Covid-19 pandemic and national security legislation, social struggle takes the form of an online 'information war', a conflict akin to concepts of discursive contestation.*

*Through a three-tiered Audio-Visual Critical Discourse Analysis of seven video sequences uploaded by KOLs, this paper seeks to answer the research question "How, and to what effect, did counter-movement Key Opinion Leaders frame the Hong Kong protests in their YouTube coverage?". Drawing on theories of social movement constitution, mediated representation of protests, and movement-counter-movement dynamics, questions regarding counter-movement's meaning-making process and its cueing of collective identities are explored. This paper argues that KOLs represent the protest(ers) as their primary diagnostic issue, framing them as (1) violent criminals, (2) irrational and unrealistic, and (3) chess-pieces of foreign powers, sedimenting from broader discourses of legality, neoliberal-stability, democracy and patriotism. It further argues, in articulating a 'we' as a prognostic cure to the diagnostic 'them', KOL's representation of the protests cues a collective identity that identifies a common ideological enemy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Millions of Hong Kong citizens participated in mass demonstrations in the summer of 2019 to protest against the Hong Kong Government's proposed Extradition Bill that would have allowed it to surrender citizens to Mainland China (hereafter China) (Lee, 2020). What started as peaceful protests evolved into an expansive and militant-in-parts movement seeking democratisation via political reforms, and the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality.

To contextualise the movement, an overview of its political background is required. During British rule, Hong Kong was classified as a liberal autocracy, with high levels of civil liberties and limited political rights (Kuan & Lau, 2002). The 'One Country, Two Systems' framework installed since the Handover, was designed to carry over these levels of civil liberties and the capitalist 'way of life' into a unique governance structure reflecting the ultimate power and sovereignty of China (Lam & Cooper, 2017). Granted a 'high degree of autonomy' following the Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-constitution), Hong Kong's leader, the Chief Executive, is elected by a 1200-member Election Committee, despite its total population of around 7.5M (Lui *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, half of Hong Kong's unicameral legislature, LegCo, are 'functional-constituencies' with only 230,000 eligible voters (*ibid.*). Simultaneously, Hong Kong's 'minimalist-government' has generated great economic success, with HKD\$1.1trillion in fiscal reserves (Tsang *et al.*, 2020), yet has given rise to drastic inequalities (Fong, 2013).

As such, Hong Kong is argued to be a 'hybrid' regime, governed by authoritarian-neoliberal power responsive to politico-economic elites and market forces, yet essentially anti-further democratisation (Ip, 2020; Wong, 2015). In 2003, half-a-million people protested against the proposed national security legislation (Ma, 2005). When the government backed down, it engendered 'protest cycles' that eventually 'normalised' and lost its disruptive power (Lee & Chan, 2011). In the decade that followed, political groups drove towards tactical radicalisation, and this was on full display during the 2014 Umbrella Movement: a 79-day civil disobedience campaign that strived for, but failed to achieve, democratic concessions (Lin, 2017). Concurrently, China's perceived encroachment in Hong Kong's autonomy generated grievances in the public discourse: against trade arrangements, disqualification of legislators, and social-political issues perceived to have originated from the influx of Mainlanders – inflation, community gentrification, shortage in healthcare etc. (Ip, 2020).

Against this background, the Anti-Extradition-Bill Movement (hereafter Hong Kong protest, movement) stemmed from a deep distrust towards the Chinese legal system and potential political prosecution. The movement displayed a cycle of tactical radicalisation resulting from protester-police interactions (Lee *et al.*, 2019): protesters employed more disruptive and belligerent tactics after the government rejected the 2-million-strong protest demand of Bill-withdrawal (June 16); the police counteracted using tear gas, rubber bullets and pepper spray, accompanied with questionable police conduct and provocative verbal outbursts; in the evening of July 21, thugs in white shirts indiscriminately attacked citizens, many of which were returning from rallies; police were perceived by many as intentionally allowing the attack to happen. This led to further escalation of protester tactics and police response, such as firing a live round at an 18-year-old protester (*ibid.*). In September, the government finally announced Bill-withdrawal, but it was insufficient for de-escalation, as the movement agenda had shifted to police brutality and universal suffrage. Protests became a fixture every weekend until the current abeyance post-Covid-19 and National Security legislation (Ismangil & Lee, 2020).

The movement was a spectrum of two ends, both tactically and ideologically, with no particular group nor activist able to represent the entire movement. Militant protesters confronted riot police on the streets and in metro stations with bricks, umbrellas and petrol bombs, while more moderate protesters participated in mass rallies, boycotts, 'human chains', or singing flashmobs (Ting, 2020). Ideologically, the ends could be labelled as 'pro-democracy' and 'localist' — the former holds broadly left-liberal ethos, while the latter has right-wing overtones in pursuing ethnocracy over issues of identity and immigration (Lee, 2020; Ip, 2020). However, as Lam & Cooper (2017) argue, the typical left-right spectrum is contextually subordinated in the primary political cleavage of pro or anti-government — the former are labelled 'yellow-ribbons', the latter 'blue-ribbons'. As such, action protocols such as 'climbing mountains together' effectively maintained solidarity. Lee (2020) argues that the key reason for mutual respect is shared movement goals, pointing to the pro-democracy camp's decisive victory in the November District Elections (388/452 seats), and the experience of 'losing' the Umbrella Movement due to intra-movement fractures.

In May 2020, however, public opinion polls showed that 39.1% and 39.2% of the public supported and opposed the movement respectively. While it is argued that the former number has dropped due to doubts over movement efficacy post-national security legislation, the latter number highlights the

increasingly loud and oppositional 'silent majority' (Lin, 2020). Of particular interest is the growing presence of counter-protesting 'Key Opinion Leaders' (KOLs) on social media platforms such as YouTube, amassing subscribers far beyond their movement-supporting equivalents, simultaneously entering the mainstream political discourse and forcing reactions from high profile activists (ibid.). Correspondingly, they become the 'voice' of anti-movement elements, and in its current abeyance, social struggle is fought as an 'symbolic contest' online.

*How do KOLs construct meaning that resonates beyond initial movement ideations? What do they say about the original movement? How do they treat intra-movement diversity? Why YouTube?*

These questions inspire this paper's inquiry into the dynamics of social struggle's 'symbolic contest' and actors' meaning-making process, in line with scholarship that has turned to social psychological and cultural aspects of collective action (Melucci, 1995; Benford & Snow, 2000). Hoping to build on literature particular to the 2019 Hong Kong protests (Ting, 2020; Lee, 2020), this paper considers concepts of framing and collective identities, and utilises a case study approach in illuminating how contextualised 'contestants' create ideological constructions that affix to broader societal discourses in order to mobilise and maintain support (Cammaerts & Jimenez-Martinez, 2014; Uldam, 2013).

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

### **Social Struggle as an Ideological War of Position**

This dissertation is theoretically rooted in the constructivist intersections of collective action and media scholarship that emphasise the role of the *discursive* in a social struggle (Cammaerts, 2018; Benford & Snow, 2000; Melucci, 1995). Movements are cast as producers of new 'interpretations of reality' (Benford, 1997: 410), thereby partaking in an ideological 'war of position' against the hegemonic common sense (Gramsci 1971; Egan, 2015). Following Foucault (2002:54), 'interpretations of reality' are seen as discursive 'practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak', with the productive symbolic power of shaping subjects, positions, legitimacy, and common sense.

#### *Hegemony*

Althusser (1971:82) defines ideology as a representation of individuals' 'imaginary relations to their real conditions of existence'. For Gramsci (1971), these real conditions are established relations of

domination, and the ideology is *hegemony*, a manufactured social order whereby dominant social groups rule by consent through leadership in socio-cultural institutions, such as the church or the media (Kazmi, 1999). In leading these institutions, dominant groups disguise their interests and 'definitions of reality' as mere *common sense*, articulated as objective, rational and anti-ideological truth, when in fact 'it is the "realistic", materialistic elements which are predominant' (Gramsci, 1971:420; Brighenti, 2016). In a process Althusser (1971:86) terms 'interpellation', subordinate classes are 'hailed' to consent and submit to hegemony through participation in ritualised institutional practices inscribed with hegemonic interests.

From this perspective, scholars have argued that discourses of neoliberalism and nationalism exemplify hegemony. As an elite-driven project, neoliberal practices 'interpellate' the 'common sense' that human wellbeing can best be achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurial prerogatives within a market-like space of strong private property rights, free markets and trade (Harvey, 2005; Clarke, 2005). Concurrently, through discursive constructions of national mythologies and rituals, elites mobilise cultural-political power derived from the nation's distinctiveness, institutionally imposing a 'reductive and politically functional' subject position (Willemsen, 2006; Gellner, 1983:56). In both discourses, hegemony functions through 'myths' (Barthes, 1973), in which common sense is constructed out of systemic connotations in naturalised metaphors and historical tautologies.

### *War of Position*

To change 'real conditions' of existence is to deconstruct the symbolic nationally-bounded market-like space, in other words, to challenge hegemonic common sense. This is Gramsci's (1971) '*war of position*' that takes place on the battlefield of ideations and discourse, with counter-hegemonic actors fighting to create alternative 'intellectual resources' that wear away and eventually replace ritualised practices (Cox, 1983:165). With visibility being essential for any movement 're-interpretations' to gain access to public discourse (Thompson, 1995), media becomes both the site and the weapon for 'symbolic contesting', due to its meaning-making affordances in representation, agenda-setting, exclusion and framing (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Silverstone, 1999). However, as the persistence of neoliberalism suggests, the war of position is a protracted conflict, rife with 'passive revolutions' where hegemony's engendered antagonisms produce bona fide changes without ever threatening fundamental interests (Gramsci, 1971). As Cammaerts (2015a) argues, this traces back to counter-

hegemonic actors' need for visibility and support, facets that are deprived if one is deemed to be on the 'constitutive outsides' of hegemony, and thus not sane or rational per 'common sense'.

Contra Althusser's totalising 'interpellation', understanding media power in tandem with symbolic struggle ascribes a degree of agency, albeit asymmetrical vis-a-vis the hegemon, to all groups in the production and negotiation of meaning. This follows Hall's (1980)'s argument that while ideology-permeated texts may have a 'preferred' reading, audiences could adopt an 'oppositional' reading. In the war of position, therefore, the proliferation of 'different discourses give subjects different positions from which to speak' (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002:17).

### **Mediation Opportunity Structure**

However, an emphasis on the discursive does not necessitate an abandonment of structuralist concepts, as Cammaerts (2018) points out, a 'cultural framing approach' traps the inherently dynamic and conflictual meaning-making process at the individual-cognitive level without fully recognising structural impediments. From a structuralist perspective such as 'political opportunity structure', however, symbolic power is wielded mostly by political and economic elites to a purely repressive effect, one that leaves little scope for a contest (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

For this paper's inquiry premises on an agential struggle, it posits that Cammaerts' (2012) concept of the *Mediation Opportunity Structure* (MOS) offers a more nuanced understanding of the power relations studied here. Cammaerts amalgamates opportunity structures with the concept of mediation, defined by Silverstone (2002:762) as the 'fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process' in which media are 'involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life'. Mediation situates power in the war of position as a dialectic, allowing for the negotiation between the dominant and subordinate actors in society (Silverstone, 2002; Martín-Barbero, 1993). Accordingly, MOS illustrates how agential opportunities and systemic constraints oscillate for movement actors on three circular fronts: mainstream media (*media*), technology (*networked*), and actors' *discursive* strategies of self-mediation.

Recalling movements' need for visibility, the media opportunity structure focuses on ways in which activists try to capture the attention of the media, to 'hack' the elite-owned mainstream (McCurdy, 2012). Following Porta & Diani (2006:170), movements use three distinct logics for enacting protest performances: the logic of numbers (i.e. demonstrations), of bearing witness (to injustice, i.e. civil

disobedience), and of damage (violence to property or people). By inducing 'the shock of the familiar made strange', the media cannot ignore movements' news value, thereby bypassing institutional agenda-setting (DeLuca & Peebles, 2002:144). In Hong Kong, mediated spectacles such as militant confrontations created 'instant grievances' that mobilised bystanders, but were also constrained by negative reporting and counter-protesting (Cottle, 2006; Tang, 2015).

The discursive opportunity structure refers to how activists self-mediate in producing and disseminating counter-narratives that take advantage of structural conditions conducive to its diffusion (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004:202). The networked opportunity structure builds on this by focusing on how technological affordances and constraints fit into self-mediation strategies. Technology was prevalent in Hong Kong protesters' repertoire, evidenced by the use of encrypted messaging apps to coordinate tactics, and more scalable forms of social media to disseminate ideations. Discursively, the movement capitalised on opportunities pertaining to the growing appeal of 'localism' among young people and grievances from China's perceived encroachment, heightening the belief in political reforms as prognosis (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

### *Self-Mediation and Framing*

The analytical lens of self-mediation places discursive claims, identity constitution and performance at the forefront of 'mediated participation' (Chouliaraki, 2010:227). The centrality of recognition in mediated self-presentation can be discerned from the rationales actors' ascribe to their use of media, which Cammaerts (2015b) maps onto Foucault's identity-constituting 'Technologies of the Self': these 'self-mediation logics' include the production and dissemination of frames and discourse in *disclosure*, reflexive frame adjustments in *examination*, and the *remembrance* of framed events.

As such, the conceptual tool of framing is widely used by scholars analysing meaning-making processes (Benford & Snow, 2000; Norris, 1995; Chong & Druckman, 2013). This paper draws on Entman's (1993:52) definition of framing as 'selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text'. Applied to social movement studies, Benford & Snow (2000:614) outline *collective action frames*: *diagnostic* frames identify blame for the selected issue, *prognostic* frames articulate the proposed solutions and strategies, and *motivational* frames spur prospective participants for mobilisation. This trifecta of frames actualises mobilisation potential by

forming a 'prism' through which one makes sense of the world according to the movement (Cammaerts, 2018:41).

Notwithstanding intra-movement diversity, the Hong Kong protests took aim at an unrepresentative political system and police abuse of power (diagnostic) and saw the overhaul of the latter (prognostic) as the only way to prevent the city from turning into a police state (Lee *et al.*, 2019). By itself, movement-specific frames connote relatively stable perceptions of reality that do not fully capture the dynamic contention of symbolic struggle (Cammaerts, 2018:44). As such, frames should be analysed as actors' strategic attempts to fix or 'sediment' meaning from broader and polysemic societal discourses with historical discursive legacies; how individual texts draw on elements and discourses of other texts, or *intertextuality*, is critical (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002).

### *Self-Mediation and Collective Identity*

Scholars argue that the construction of a movement-collective identity is one of the most important goals of movement framing (Melucci, 1995; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Via the textual codification of frames, movements adjust three orders of orientations in cognitive definitions (Gamson, 1992): first, the status quo's *injustice* that is attributed to movement antagonists — the 'them', second, the *agential* motivations derived from frames of urgency, and third, drawing the boundaries of agential participants — the 'us'. Relatively stable orientations of these *motivational frames* construct a collective 'we' possessing 'interactive and shared definitions' of the 'field of opportunities and constraints' (Melucci, 1995:44).

Collective identities are not constructed in a vacuum, but subject to relations with social structures. In this sense, efficacy is shaped by 'strategic processes' of *frame alignment* that bridge movement frames with *affective* and pre-existing societal frameworks (Benford & Snow, 2000:623). Subject to MOS, frame alignment crystallises the collective identity's relational dimension, forming affective ties between movement frames and the cognition of sympathetic bystanders (Benford & Snow, 2000; Melucci, 1995). Through alignment with intertextual narrations, frames exploit shortcuts in humans' meaning-making, as we organise and process information according to a limited repertoire of socio-cultural narratives, thereby strengthening the frame-prism's empirical credibility through cultural believability, as well as the affective resonance of collective identities (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000:42).

In line with this, the 'us versus them' dichotomy is a simplistic metaphor of the collective identities that are constructed within discourse by frames that mark difference in the Other, produced in 'historical and institutional sites' with 'specific modalities of power' (Hall, 1996:4). As Laclau & Mouffe (1985) argue, identification is 'an act of power' linking together signifiers (of discursive associations) in *chains of equivalence* that establish the identity relationally, pinpointing what the identity equals and what it differs from. Echoing the 'war of position', identification is an incomplete and contentious process vis-a-vis 'a violent hierarchy between two resultant poles' (Laclau, 1990). Here, polarisation echoes Derrida's (1978) assertion of the self as defined via juxtaposition to its 'constitutive outside', while Laclau's (1990) emphasis on contention connotes the constant symbolic struggle between actors who seek to instil contrasting identity-boundaries.

## **Counter Movement**

So far, this section has traced insights from the constructivist cultural-framing approach. At this point, however, this paper must address the literature's tendency, with a few exceptions (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; McCaffrey & Keys, 2000; Rohlinger, 2002; Zald & Useem, 1987; Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020), to reduce today's symbolic war of position into a largely *bilateral* struggle, one between social movements and an undifferentiated opponent of 'hegemonic elite', be it mainstream media, corporate actors or the state itself.

Following selected scholars, this paper argues that a bilateral approach fails to fully examine the political environment in which symbolic power struggles take place. Of particular importance is the under-theorisation of counter-movements, defined by Mottl (1980:630) as movements that strive to resist or to reverse social change, or at the very least 'stabilise the change process generated by the initial movement'. McCaffrey & Keys' (2000) study on abortion debates and Ayoub & Chetaille's (2020) on anti-LGBT activism demonstrate the empirical pitfalls with subsuming counter-movements under the 'hegemonic elite': First, they may have an indifferent relationship to authorities, with less concrete linkages to broader forms of organisations that devalue voice from a top-down manner (Couldry, 2010). Second, some counter-movements' formal status of being bottom-up and outside the political process presents a different set of mediated opportunities, with particular affordances such as creating an unpopular image of movement goals vis-a-vis a 'silent majority'.

### *Movement Counter-Movement Dynamics*

Therefore, scholars have emphasised the significance of ‘movement-counter-movement (M-CM) dynamics’ in the *multilateral* symbolic struggle, by way of ‘counter-framing strategies’ that respond to oppositional movement frames (Lo, 1982; Zald & Useem, 1987). Echoing self-mediating examination, Benford & Hunt (2003) theorise that counter-movements will first deny the original diagnostic or acknowledge it but dispute its root cause (counter-attribution), before proposing counter-prognoses and attacking the movement’s collective identity. In response, movements will ignore or mirror counter-frames in adopting oppositional symbols with strategic mimicry (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020). Along the same lines, McCaffrey & Keys (2000:50) outline strategies of *polarisation-vilification*: polarisation replaces articulated frames with a ‘black-and-white version of events’ that justifies urgent mobilisation, while vilification discredits counter-movements as corrupt and hypocritical; in tandem, the movement sees itself ‘as a moral agent fighting against evil’. In this light, effective counter-frames can discredit leaders, de-legitimise popularised frames, and justify authorities’ force, thereby threatening movements’ very existence (Zald & Useem, 1987).

The MOS is thus altered by M-CM dynamics with ‘counter-contestants’ seeking to impose their own ‘interpretations of reality’. Again, relatively little empirical attention has been given to how frame alignment processes operate in the context including counter-movements, but even scholars that do so write from the perspective of the original challenger. While undoubtedly insightful, overlooking precisely how, or even whether, frame alignment processes take place in counter-movements implies a tacit equivalence of movements and counter-movements, even though each has their distinct allies, relations, strategies, and diametrically opposed goals, and thus interacts with drastically different MOS.

### **Reactionary Frames**

Having established that movement goals, tactics and linkages with societal discourses can be garnered from framing content and strategies, this paper’s inquiry into the equivalent for counter-movements’ continues on two fronts: literature on mainstream media, and social psychological scholarship on affective and cognitive processes. This selection of literature is premised on three interrelated assertions regarding social movements. First, they challenge some facet of the status quo using tactics that may encourage mobilisation outside of institutional channels and provoke authorities’ forceful intervention (Cottle, 2006). Second, movements have an *affective* dimension

(Jasper, 1998). Third, like counter-movements, mainstream media's representation of social movements are observed to be ideologically biased against movements, due to the frameworks inherent in journalistic routines (McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Gitlin, 1980; McCurdy, 2012).

### *Protest Paradigm*

The ostensible ideological congruence, at least vis-a-vis social movements, of counter-movements and the mainstream media, connotes the possibility of alignment between their framing tendencies. Herman & Chomsky's (1988) Propaganda Model, for example, asserts that large-scale media companies 'manufacture consent' to ideologies aligned with powerful societal interests that finance them. As such, we turn to the '*protest paradigm*', defined by McLeod & Hertog (1999:310) as a 'routinised pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protest'. This 'pattern' is characterised by an emphasis on violence (per the logic of damage), the adoption of official sources (maintaining an illusion of 'objectivity'), and highlights protest and protester deviance by marginalising, demonising and de-legitimising them. In their study of Vietnam War demonstrations, Halloran *et al.* (1970) add to the understanding of journalistic patterns by way of 'inferential frameworks' that predict violence before protests happen.

For Hall (1981), protest deviance is key for elites to frame the world as a 'consensus' with elite-designated models of 'normal behaviour'. Gitlin (1980) observes how the deviance of student demonstrations is constructed by frames of *trivialisation*, *polarisation* (between 'extremists' and the 'peaceful majority') and *marginalisation* (of protest grievances or antecedent conditions). Correspondingly, Dardis (2006) offers a comprehensive typology of 'marginalisation devices', including the '*Romper Room*' frame that highlights protesters' 'childlike' behaviour, the '*circus-carnival*' frame that portrays protests as a theatrical spectacle, the '*freak show*' frame that makes light of physical oddities, and the '*public opinion*' frame that quotes bystanders or public opinion polls to underline the deviance of protests.

Along similar lines, the '*public nuisance paradigm*' (Di Cicco, 2010:136) emphasise media's crusade against the 'idea of protest itself'. Particularly in a conservative political culture, the media would frame protests as *bothersome*, a hindrance on daily life, *impotent*, something without merit, and *unpatriotic*, a demonstration of ingratitude towards freedoms already enjoyed. As Donson *et al.* (2004:7) point out in their study of anti-systemic movements, by replacing individual identities with

fixed simplifications like ‘thugs’, ‘anarchists’ or ‘folk devils’, mediated deviance results in the invocation of *moral panics*, intimidating people into taking up a defensive ‘fortress mentality’.

### *Police Legitimacy*

Turning to the other end of the protester-authority dynamic, frames of police legitimacy, defined here as the belief that police as power holders ‘are procedurally just and distributively fair’ (Tyler & Jackson, 2013:92), can add to media’s hegemonic construction of public disorder. Despite the police’s ‘double and contradictory’ function, in which they are both the ‘agent of the people it polices and of the dominant classes controlling these same people’ (McNair, 2011:109), mainstream portrayals of police are characterised by uncritical association with positive cultural values such as heroism, benevolence and the common good (Graziano & Gauthier, 2018). Moreover, Lawrence (2000:9) argues that police are represented as authoritative arbiters on what ‘crime’ is: via this prism, the malleable use of physical coercion inherent to the nature of policing is de-contextualised and validated as the only deterrent to public nuisance (Jackson *et al.*, 2013; Di Cicco, 2010). This ‘blue veil’ of police prestige also render any ‘non-professional’ second guessing of police actions, such as allegations of police brutality, as circumscribing police effectiveness and public safety (McNair, 2011:13; Gerber & Jackson, 2017).

### *Social Psychology*

This section turns to social psychology to deconstruct ideations that engender cognitive bias against social change. As these biases are arguably shared with counter-movements, consonance raises the possibility of discursive alignment between counter-frames and these ideations.

First, it is argued that the public nuisance paradigm is particularly conducive in a conservative culture due to the conservative-cognitive framework of ‘strict father morality’ (Di Cicco, 2010:136). Disobedience to authority is perceived as amoral behaviour, threatening to the social order and thus justifying restrictions of civil liberties, juxtaposing the liberal ‘nurturant parent’ which sees authority questioning as healthy and productive. Another related theory is *System Justification* (Jost *et al.*, 2017:101), which suggests most people are motivated ‘to defend, bolster and justify’ the status quo on which they depend on, based on *epistemic* desires for certainty and structure, and *existential* desires for safety and security. Kelman (1969) deconstructs this dependence as instrumental attachment,

committing to the system perceived as an effective vehicle for achieving one's ends, in the form of institutions, law and order.

### *Affect and Emotion*

This literature review has alluded to the affective dimensions of social struggle: frames and identities-cues, for example, were acknowledged to be particularly constitutive if they struck affective resonance. Humans are not apathetic automatons, and emotions pervade throughout social struggle and permeate 'our ideas, identities, and interests' (Jasper, 1998:399).

Jasper (2018) argues that emotions, as feelings, provocations, and engagements, should be conceptually split into three. The first, *reflex emotions* such as fear and anger, are the volatile reactions to our immediate physical and social environment. However, disruptive reflex fears such as moral panics tap into background anxieties relating to long-term attachments or aversions. These *affective commitments* are stable feelings of sentiment regarding our convictions and solidarities, and reflect how we 'map the world into people, places and things' that are loved, hated or feared (ibid.:102). Alone, they do not lead to action, but they inform it when there are triggering threats, to one's home, for example, due to the deep psychosocial attachments one forms to symbols of ontological security (ibid.:109).

In contrast to cognitive models of morality as the apathetic application of principles, Jasper sees it as a 'feeling-thinking process' entwined with affective commitments and *moral emotions* (ibid.:6). Moral emotions arise from intuitive evaluations of others' and our own actions, via-a-vis affective ties and cognitive beliefs about the status quo. The first cluster of moral emotions concerns one's reputation, from the deontological *pride* of feeling morally valuable after 'doing the right thing', to the self-righteousness from following moral rules despite opposition (ibid.:140). In turn, failure to follow moral rules yields *shame*, an emotion that when outwardly directed (the second cluster) becomes contempt. Conversely, *compassion* is derived when one thinks of others' predicament as serious and undeserved. Finally, the third cluster includes feelings of *indignation* tied to a sense of injustice or unfairness, a 'moral shock' invoked by moral violations to affective intuitions.

'Feeling-thinking processes' unpack the emotional dimensions of framing and collective identities. Pride, shame, or indignation are subject to discursive frames that create political characterisations, implying the emotions that social actors are supposed to feel for 'them' — victims to pity, heroes to

respect, or villains to punish. Affect allows us to understand that rather than merely 'drawing a cognitive boundary' (Jasper, 1998:409), collective identities are formed by shifting moral valuations, forging affective ties to our self-esteem and dignity. Through frames, symbols or narratives, actors articulate, stabilise and elaborate moral intuitions, and they resonate when the right emotions are tapped (ibid.:401; Poell *et al.*, 2018). The energising power of self-pride and ontological security, for example, forms a powerful 'moral battery' (Jasper, 2018:51) for mobilisation when it is combined with the devastation of moral panic and shame.

### **Counter-Movement Opinion Leaders**

In Hong Kong, counter-movements' focus on the discursive is evidenced by the presence of high-profile, self-proclaimed 'Key Opinion Leaders' (KOLs) on YouTube. Echoing the marketing concept of *opinion leaders* (Weimann, 2008) and *micro-celebrities* (Marwick, 2016), these are influentials that guide the formation of attitudes and opinions. Sociologists distinguish opinion leaders from the herd based on '*who one is*', the personification of values, '*what one knows*', competence and knowledge, and '*whom one knows*', their strategic location in a *network* (Katz, 1957). As 'micro-celebrities', they incorporate elements of celebrity into individual subjectivity (Marwick, 2016:333), presenting themselves and their ideations as a 'personal brand' to be consumed, using strategic *relatability* to attract followers, and building trust via *authenticity* and *accountability* (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lewis, 2020).

#### *YouTube as Media Practice*

As with the broader concept of mediation, mediated self-branding considers the 'double articulation' of the symbolic and *material* (Silverstone, 1994). This double articulation concerns what contextualised actors actually do with material communication technologies, or 'media practices' (Couldry, 2004), and what affordances these technologies have for the symbolic. For KOLs, 'media practices' are videos posted on YouTube, usually in the form of vlogs — short video blogs that often feature individual monologues to the camera (Raby *et al.*, 2018). As a social media platform, YouTube shares affordances of persistence, scalability and searchability (boyd, 2010). Scholars argue that these affordances make YouTube, with its dynamic capacity for displaying individual performances and audience feedback, the perfect tool for self-branding and self-expression (Burgess & Green, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2012). In the context of political intervention, YouTube has branded themselves as an

empowering tool for bottom-up users (Gillespie, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012), an assertion that is shared by techno-utopian scholars who see social media as a fundamentally democratising force where anyone can have a voice and contribute to public discourse (Ito, 2008; Benkler, 2006).

However, despite examples of technology-enabled progressive *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), Lewis' (2020) study of right-wing 'political influencers' hint at the alignment potential between mediated self-branding and a reactionary political standpoint. Using genres native to YouTube such as vlogging or 'response videos', these influencers disseminate ideations and enact their 'micro-celebrity' via advertising techniques such as testimonials, storytelling, or affective cues (Lewis, 2018;2020). Banet-Weiser (2012:55-59) argues that mediated self-branding strategies operate akin to Foucauldian 'technologies of the self'; only in this context the self is an embodiment of counter-framed materials, designed to generate loyalty towards itself via mediated access to moral frameworks of authenticity, relatability and accountability.

### *Networked Publics*

Political influencers are, in effect, 'personality-centered modes of authoritarianism' at the heart of the counter-protesting networked publics (Lewis, 2020). Networked publics are 'imagined collectives' of interconnected 'nodes' using technologies to connect for social, cultural and civic purposes (boyd, 2010; Castells, 2009). In this context, 'nodes' are the users linked in one way or another to influencers, be it those who share their content 'frictionlessly' across platforms (van Dijck, 2013), leave comments on videos, or simply internalise their ideations. Platforms also allow influencers to interact with each other, maximising visibility as an 'Alternative Influencer Network' (Lewis, 2020). As Papacharissi (2010) argues, social media collapses previously distinct spatial, social and temporal contexts, opening up new possibilities for identity formation by allowing a space for every facet of our personalities.

Furthermore, affective affordances of platforms are conducive for the emotional construction of collective identities. Scholars have pointed out how platforms' 'flow of information' consists of ceaseless affective input, blending deeply subjective opinions and emotions that reinforce in-group out-group affiliations, directing one to find their 'own place in the story' (Papacharissi & Oliveria, 2012; Poell *et al.*, 2018). Communal bonds are bolstered through affordances for impression management, individualised stories, and tension-invigorating forms of emotional *jouissance* (Milan,

2015; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Directed outwards, online identity constructions can encourage malicious behaviour such as collective trolling, where reactionary groups perform identity-based harassment by provoking and attacking target users, distracting them from discussions 'that matter', or releasing their private information to enforce silence (Ortiz, 2020).

Networked publics also proactively engage in online expressions to manipulate the opinion climate. In China, the '*voluntary fifty-cent army*' (referencing those who are paid for this work) express support for the state while accusing detractors of being foreign spies, and 'hook' targets with fabricated information in order to collectively ridicule them afterwards (Han, 2015). Banaji *et al.* (2019) delineate networks' capabilities for spreading disinformation, or information designed to discredit progressive groups, and its drastic repercussions in vigilante violence. In the Indian context, disinformation's ties to ethno-religious bigotry invoke 'grandiose illusions' about in-group superiority, with conspiratorial exaggeration instigating moral emotions of false victimhood (ibid.:16). Alluding to the significance of influentials, most users forwarded messages, regardless of implausibility, based on the immediate source's trustworthiness per ideological, family and communal ties (ibid.:4).

From the outside, opinion leaders' centrality as the 'voice' of counter-movements or counter-networked-publics, evoke Cooren's (2012) metaphor of ventriloquism (cited in Kavada, 2015:881); via media practices, they seem to take on both the role of the ventriloquist and that of the dummy, making it seem like a 'counter-movement' is saying or doing something. Yet, as Banaji *et al.* (2019)'s research shows, vertical influence could have concrete consequences. Nonetheless, counter-movements represented by political influencers juxtapose greatly with leaderless and decentralised connective action that horizontally tie together 'ordinary protesters' via personal links (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The ontological distinctions between movements and counter-movements cannot be dismissed.

## Conceptual Framework & Research Questions

This paper's inquiry into the 'symbolic contest' of social struggle finds credence in concepts of symbolic power, the war of position and mediation opportunity structures, all of which emphasise the significance of the discursive in constituting movement actors and actualising mobilisation potential (Cammaerts, 2018; Melucci, 1995). However, this paper's research objective of examining counter-movements' self-mediation is an attempt to shed light on the neglected M-CM dynamics in discursive contestation (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). As such, this paper will utilise the concept of framing to investigate how counter-movements produce and disseminate their ideations. Applying a deductive approach in pre-determining possible framing strategies, this paper will examine counter-movements' use of collective action frames (diagnostic, prognostic, motivational) or strategies of counter-framing that allows for contention with original movement frames (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Benford & Hunt, 2003).

In deducing countermovement-specific frames, it will turn to frames used by mainstream media reporting (McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Di Cicco, 2010), as well as pro-status quo ideations as outlined by cognitive psychology (Jost *et al.*, 2017). However, mindful of how 'relatively stable' frames may obscure the dynamic contention of symbolic struggle, this paper will relate frame-content to broader intertextual societal discourses (Cammaerts, 2018). Furthermore, cultural referents are elaborated in their affective dimension (Jasper, 2018) that contribute to self-mediation's identity-constitution. This follows Shahin *et al.*'s (2016) calls for situated case study approaches that contextually apply theories of mediated representation, in light of (protest) paradigms shifting temporally and contextually based on protest goals, tactics, and opportunity structures.

In this context where the counter-movement is constituted by KOLs and their media practices, this paper will also take into account how frame content or framing strategies may intersect with micro-celebrity, self-branding techniques (Lewis, 2018; Marwick, 2016). In doing so, and with reference to frame-denoted ends, means and relations, it hopes to discern whether the formation of collective identity is as crucial and constituting for vertical counter-movements as it is for social movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Due to time and political constraints, evaluating the success of framing or collective identity-construction will be beyond this paper's scope, as measurements of effect on audiences necessitate interactions via interviews or focus groups. Instead, this paper will investigate

whether, and what sort of, collective identity is cued by opinion leaders in their self-mediating media practices, in line with the following research question:

How, and to what effect, did counter-movement Key Opinion Leaders frame the Hong Kong protests in their YouTube coverage?

- To what extent did counter-framing reflect a discursive strategy to construct a collective identity?
- To what extent did counter-frames engage with initial-movement frames and broader discourses?
- To what extent did opinion leaders employ micro-celebrity practices in frame dissemination?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

In line with this paper's conceptual focus on symbolic contestation, its selected method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is theoretically rooted in the assertion that 'texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power' (Fairclough, 1995:132). Rejecting the veneer of neutrality around language usage, CDA is particularly apt for this research due to its dual focus on how discourse is both constitutive and constituted (Fairclough, 2003); constitutive in the sense of sustaining, reproducing and naturalising relations of power in identities, subjectivities and legitimacy — echoing this paper's treatment of identities and knowledge 'frame-prisms' — and constituted by asymmetrical power relations operating in socio-cultural formations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). From the perspective of the subordinate (Wodak, 2001), CDA treats the unravelling of constructed opacity in the relationship between text, discursive and social elements as key to disclosing and criticising unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2003).

Accordingly, Fairclough (1995) points to three tiers of analysis: the textual, discursive, and societal, which will serve as this paper's research design. As CDA understands language as 'a system of signs in which the value of any sign derives from its relation to another' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough,

1999:47), articulations of textual-linguistic elements in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary connote discursive constructions. At the discursive level, CDA is interested in the assumptions, motivations, absences, and truth effects embedded in the text through linguistic features such as modality (degree of affiliation) or nominalisation (delegation of agency) (Fairclough, 2003). Specifically for this paper, CDA's focus on lexical implications offers a pivotal entry point in deconstructing affective processes of Othering within frames — how binary stereotypes of the self and the Other are defined by the attribution of desirable linguistic properties (Hall, 1997; Rose, 2001).

Moreover, this paper's consideration of hegemonic antagonisms can find pertinence in CDA's emphasis on *intertextuality*, or the interconnections between different materials (Rose, 2001; van Dijk, 1997). For Fairclough (1993:137), incorporations of other ideations and historical-cultural baggage engender a productive 'recombination' of discourses that nonetheless remains constrained by hegemonic relations, akin to Gramscian 'passive revolutions'. In this vein, CDA sees the discursive as mediating between linguistics and societal structures, operationalising this paper's treatment of micro-level texts as windows to macro-ideations, power relations and social realities (Fairclough, 2012; Philips & Jørgensen, 2002).

As such, CDA's unique focus on the 'dialectical relations between discourse and power', and their effects on social relations of dominance, resistance and control (Fairclough, 2013:8; Wodak, 2001) is deemed methodologically suitable for this paper's quest to situate M-CM symbolic contestation within macro-societal structures, and to ascertain texts' cues for meaning and identity-constitution. Concurrently, it rejects the use of quantitative methods such as content analysis, as a strict empirical focus on the frequency of elements can obscure power dialectics by overlooking what is excluded and disregarding the infrequent yet socially significant ideations (Rose, 2001).

### *Audio-Visual Critical Discourse Analysis*

For this paper's investigates meaning-making via YouTube vlogging practices, its research design will augment CDA's linguistic focus with semiotic approaches more apt for visual analysis (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002). Akin to CDA's conception of language, at the core of visual semiotics is the understanding that meaning is produced from the selection and combination of culturally resonant 'signs' (Barthes, 1973). Every sign consists of a denotative signifier, which is its literal, descriptive form, and a connoted signified, associated higher-level meanings vis-a-vis broader societal discourses

(Hall, 1997; Rose 2001). In videos, the denotation-connotation framework examines how meaning is constructed visually by the videomakers' selection of semiotic resources, in sounds, expressions, or clothes (Hall, 1997).

This paper's pilot study employed this mixed-method to analyse counter-protesters' *visual* representation of the movement — the Other, however, as the emphasis now is on vlogging practices that are characterised more as relatively static mono(duo)logues, the construction of the Other is delegated to spoken language. As such, visual analysis is more relevant to illuminate micro-celebrity practices — the construction of a 'networked-us' via authenticity, relatability and accountability. This paper turns to Jewitt & Oyama's (2001:140) framework of semiotic meta-functions: (1) the representation of bodies, manner and activity, (2) the interactive cultivation of distance or superiority via gaze and point of view, and (3) the compositional layout distinguishing elements to be made obvious or obscured.

## **Research Design**

In summary, this paper operationalises Fairclough's (1995) three-tiered model of CDA, considering the *textual*, *discursive*, and *societal* dimensions of each video sequence. (1) At the textual level, it will analyse how linguistic elements represent the status quo, protesters, and original movement frames. Also, it will turn to semiotic metafunctions to discern intersections with micro-celebrity. (2) In the discursive dimension, emphasis will be placed on connoted assumptions, affective resonances, truth claims, and framing objectives, as well as intertextual links. (3) Finally, the societal dimension will attempt to ascertain broader ideologies, macro-definitions of reality and alluded power relations that the previous dimensions motivate towards. Here, an emphasis is also placed on the cueing of a collective identity. Insofar as the three dimensions amalgamate, this paper will adopt a holistic approach in categorising its analysis and discussion thematically pursuant to theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Philips & Jørgensen, 2002).

## **Sampling**

In selecting texts, this paper employed the strategy of purposeful sampling, selecting information-rich cases that yield 'in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations' (Patton, 2002:401). This is in line with situated case study approaches that focus on unmasking contextual dynamics (Shahin *et al.*, 2016), and Rose's (2001) remark that audio-visual CDA should sample based on semiotic

richness, 'conceptual relevance' for answering RQs, and the researcher's own judgement with regards to these criteria. As such, this paper enacts the mixed method of *intensity* and *theory-construct* sampling. Intensity sampling looks for cases that 'manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely' (Patton, 2002:422), in this sense, videos from KOLs covering the Hong Kong protests in relative depth were considered; theoretical sampling finds 'case manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest' (ibid.:437), which for this inquiry includes frames, affect, identity cues, and micro-celebrity practices.

The YouTube channel of *Dominic Lee* (hereafter Dominic) proved a pivotal entry point. Having popularised the genre of KOLs, and with more than 245K subscribers and 3.6M views (the most out of KOLs), he is widely regarded as their figurehead. A self-described 'Juris Doctor and entrepreneur', he aims to 'promote factually correct and logical information'. Furthermore, Dominic launched 'KOL100', a network linked via his 'Channels' page, in which they promote and participate in each other's content. Other KOLs were sampled via this network, and three sequences were taken from Dominic's channel: 'US supplying arms to Hong Kong radicals, protesters' drug use and prostitution' (Text 1); 'How to convince 'yellow' friends to turn 'blue?' (Text 2); 'US strategy to bring back 'black violence' (Text 3).

*Ivan Mok*, self-styled 'fat-boy-kit' (hereafter Ivan), has a similarly sizeable online presence, with 209K subscribers and 3.6M views. In 2016, he launched a court bid to unseat pro-democracy lawmakers during the oath-taking controversy, a lawsuit later taken up by the government. Echoing the focus on M-CM dynamics, content from both Ivan and Dominic have been targeted for response by student leaders. Two sequences were taken from Ivan's videos: 'Analysing brainwashed 'yellow-ribbons'' (Text 4); 'Revealing the military structure of 'black-shirts'' (Text 5).

Finally, *Keybros* is the latest channel featured on Dominic's network, starring two English-speaking youth-KOLs from Hong Kong currently studying law in London. Still in its infancy, with 100,000 views and 5K subscribers, the channel is growing exponentially post-feature. Despite their inclusion, Keybros has a unique self-styled 'centrist' position, hoping to 'bridge the gap between both sides through civil discussion'. Given their shared youthful disposition vis-a-vis protesters, Keybros illuminates questions under theoretical constructs of (self)-Othering, counter-movement position-ing, and micro-celebrity interactions. Two sequences were taken from two of Keybros' videos: activists 'Joshua Wong (Text 6) and Denise Ho (Text 7) Exposed with FACTS AND LOGIC'.

In total, seven videos were transcribed and analysed. As this paper focuses on counter-framing of protest and the antecedent status quo, videos were sampled from December 2019 (when Dominic began his channel) to June 2020, before the agenda rapidly shifted to the National Security Law. For the purpose of discussion, Cantonese sequences were translated into English. Recognising how transcription and translation add additional layers of subjectivity by embedding the researcher's interpretation of spoken word, particular care was taken in translating phrasings consistently and marking Cantonese' lexical, grammatical and semiotic intonations in detail (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002:80).

### **Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity**

Despite its applicability to this paper's research objectives, CDA's inter-disciplinary and flexible approach is not without its limitations. While Fairclough (1995) sees the inclusion of social theory as a vital part of CDA's explanatory toolbox, critiques on CDA's academic rigour begin by pointing out that the choice of framework is entirely subject to researcher judgement (Breeze, 2011). This subjectivity dictates researchers to 'discover' what they are looking for by singling out textual features that fit their chosen interpretive framework, establishing the 'primacy of their ideological position' by ignoring data that disagrees with their 'particular discourse perspective' (Widdowson, 1998:149). In this sense, CDA's 'top-down' application is an unsystematic 'circular argumentation' that generates results 'confirming the obvious' vis-a-vis chosen theories and the researcher's political biases (Breeze, 2011:513-515).

Furthermore, Breeze (2011:508) argues that CDA's privileging of researcher interpretation fails to account for the polysemic meanings construable from texts, thus adopting a naive 'transmission view of meaning', whereby texts 'produce, condition and restrict the thought processes' of audiences. For Widdowson (1998), this one-way 'linguistic determinism' cannot be substantiated if the only evidence of cognition is language use. As such, echoing the literature reviewed (Hall, 1980; Cammaerts, 2018), this paper acknowledges how people navigate, accept or reject different discourses, and CDA's limitations in capturing audience agency and the plurality of interpretations. To this end, it makes no sweeping claim as to how audiences make-meaning from KOLs' videos, nor how a collective identity is actually constructed — electing to focus on how KOLs make-meaning in videos, and whether a collective identity is *cued*. What audiences do with these cues are beyond this paper's scope, and can

be subject to future research utilising audience-interaction methods such as interviews (Banaji *et al.*, 2019; Stubbs, 1997).

In a similar vein, Verschueren (2011) argues that CDA, in focusing too much on establishing the connection between texts and ideologies, often ignores the *immediate* context within which texts would usually be read (Breeze, 2011:506). This paper's inquiry into micro-celebrity techniques is an attempt to shed light on the immediate multi-modal context that mediates between ideations and reception. However, due to time constraints, other elements of the YouTube architecture such as comments or recommended videos were considered outside this paper's scope. Social network analysis would be useful in visualising networked antagonisms and how identities are enacted on YouTube's comment space (Murthy & Sharma, 2019).

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

In response to concerns of subjectivity and bias, the researcher acknowledges that rather than 'discovering the truth or producing a 'definitive reading'', he is producing 'readings that are warranted by attention to the detail of texts and what lend coherence to the discourse being studied' (Gill, 1996:147). CDA accepts that researchers are permeated with biases, thus the researcher must engage in rigorous self-reflexivity in interrogating his assumptions and positioning (Gill, 1996; Fairclough, 2003:14).

In this light, as an ethnically Chinese-Japanese Hong Konger examining Hong Kong affairs, distinct advantages and reflexive limitations can be discerned. With Cantonese being my native language, I could analyse and translate materials firsthand (subjectivity discussed above), and my prior knowledge of the socio-cultural-political context aided in sampling and macro-analysis. However, this prior knowledge inevitably magnifies the risk of projecting bias. Consistent with self-reflexivity, the researcher has remained attentive to his beliefs: he is broadly supportive of the movement's liberal aims and sympathetic to protest tactics. He sees violence as manifestation of beliefs that tactics 'less violent will not succeed in alleviating the circumstance of injustice' (Honderich, 1989, cited in Cammaerts, 2013: 3). To mitigate this oppositional positioning vis-a-vis counter-protesters, this paper has grounded its conceptual framework in established literature and theory, justified to its utmost methodological decisions, and conclusions will be derived systematically from textual evidence via CDA's three-tiered model.

This paper's methodological framework and research objectives were approved by the researcher's supervisor; an ethics form was submitted and approved under the ethical guidelines of the LSE.

## **ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION**

To discern how KOLs construct a 'knowledge-prism' in disseminating its ideations and identity-cues, this analytical section will be separated according to 'Collective Action Frames' of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. Via CDA, three distinct but interrelated diagnostics emerge: (1) the violent, criminal protester, (2) the irrational, unrealistic protester, and (3) foreign intervention. As will become clear, these frames act as simplifying devices for broader discourses of legality, neo-liberal-stability, democracy and patriotism. Moreover, in articulating the 'we' as the prognostic cure to a diagnostic 'them', the framing process cues a collective identity that identifies a common ideological enemy, the constitutive outside.

### **Diagnostic: The Violent, Criminal Protestor**

#### *Revolutionary Violence*

Akin to the 'protest paradigm', KOLs' core grievances were targeted at protesters' violent confrontation tactics. All seven texts emphasised protesters' 'logic of damage' without distinction — damage to things: vandalism of metro-stations and shops, throwing of bricks and petrol-bombs, and violence against people: direct vigilante attacks on counter-protesters, termed 'private resolutions' (Lee, 2019). Two distinct cases were elaborated or alluded to in 'setting fire on' or 'killing someone': the death of a 70-year-old man hit on the head by a brick (Text 3), and a middle-aged man set on fire, by radical protesters (Text 6).

"If people have actually hijacked the movement to loot, to steal, to destroy public property or killing someone, I think that should definitely be condemned in any society, not just Hong Kong". (Keybros, Text 6)

"Thugs and the 'black violence' want to turn Hong Kong back to the 'dynasty of black violence'". (Dominic, Text 3)

“Hong Kong’s thugs have reached the level of military structures. They have immense scale, strategy, and organisation, transferring information from level to level”. (Ivan, Text 5)

In these quotes, violence is condemned as illegal, destructive and orchestrated, and serves as a tool to ‘polarise’ events into ‘black-and-white’ (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). KOLs’ Cantonese term for protesters, 暴徒 — ‘follower of violence’ (translated as ‘thugs’), and the aggregated movement, 黑暴 — ‘black violence’, subsumes aims and diverse tactics into the signifier of violence. These terms were used interchangeably to describe either the movement’s radical wing or the ‘yellow-bloc’ as a whole, depending on whether intra-movement distinctions were being made.

For Dominic, the movement aims to create ‘a dynasty of black violence’: this temporal denotation connotes the intertextual idea that the movement drives towards permanence: in this sense, it cannot be satisfied even if their current goals are met — they will simply find another ‘excuse to keep engaging in acts of violence’ (Text 6). Since violence is re-framed as the movement’s end-goal, there is little need for the government to negotiate with ‘fictitious’ non-violent frames or tactics. Dynasty’s monarchical dimension also connotes protesters’ aim to *rule*, feeding into intertextual historical analogies of ‘coloured revolutions’ (Text 1,3,5,6). In framing military-esque ‘scale, strategies and organisation’ via lexical links to army divisions, covert operations, and weaponry (Text 5), the movement is framed as an *orchestrated* revolution overthrowing the state through violent means, invoking epistemic and existential attachments. In its ‘revolution-frame’, KOLs re-frames movement ideas of ‘insurrectionary symbolic damage’: appropriating symbolic spaces controlled by dominant actors to bring the ‘illegitimacy of the private to public attention’, *without* aiming to overthrow the regime (Williams, 2008, cited in Cammaerts, 2013:529).

### *Rule of Law*

“How is it legitimate for a criminal to say, “oh, I wanted to do this in order to protect myself from being arrested?” (Keybros, Text 6)

“Their legal values are completely overturned! They tell themselves (in a childish tone) “oh, you’re not breaking the law, you’re only helping others!” (Ivan, Text 4)

KOLs’ uniform framing of violence aligns with the societal discourse of ‘rule of law’ that dichotomises law-abiding citizens and law-breaking *criminals*. These quotes exclaim the illegality of violent tactics

in moral indignation, and channels it into the construction of one-dimensional ‘folk devils’, anonymising constituents as ‘criminals’, ‘fugitives’ or ‘thugs’ (Text 3,4,6) (Donson *et al.*, 2004). Via prosopopoeia, and putting on a childish tone, Dominic asks his co-host “can you give me a hundred dollars?”. When she shakes her head, he gestures to hit her, saying “why? I asked you so nicely!” (Text 2). Criminality here is underpinned by a childish, ‘*Romper Room*’ framed-cognition (Dardis, 2006), and violence is de-contextualised as an aberrant reaction vis-a-vis reasonable responses to unreasonable requests. Echoing the tone of a ‘strict father’ (Di Cicco, 2010), he asks — “if we ask for something in a really polite way and they don’t acquiesce, do we to resort to violence?” (Text 2).

“We do support peaceful protests according to the law (...) the idea that we have no alternatives other than violence to express our opinions is simply untrue, we have so many peaceful means, like the peaceful protests last year (...) violence is never the resolution”. (Keybros, Text 6)

“They’re just singing at malls, now we might think there’s not much threat or lethality. But they warm up the movement. If from the beginning you tell people to throw bricks or petrol bombs, then maybe not a lot of citizens will support. So you ‘start from shallow before going deep’ – now this shows they have strategic planning”. (Dominic, Text 3)

The constructed dynamic between peace and violence connotes assumptions on ‘law’ and criminality. For Dominic, intra-movement distinctions are insignificant, and the moderates are criminals-by-association and criminals-to-be. Adopting an ‘inferential framework’ (Halloran *et al.*, 1970), flashmobs are framed as tactical fronts to escalate participants; this strategy’s validity was aligned to cultural narrations — the Cantonese idiom ‘start shallow before going deep’. On the other hand, Keybros ground their indignation towards violent tactics via the exoneration of moderate peaceful-protesters. Framing ‘expression’ as an objective, violence is rendered illegitimate due to legal affordances for peaceful alternatives. In ‘violence is *never* the resolution’, they blankly reject movement frames of ‘realising the higher goal of social justice through the illegal act’ (Lee & Chan, 2018).

This framed dichotomy between legally ‘good/bad’ protesters capitalises on contextual discursive opportunities. Following Lee & Chan (2011), ‘rule of law’, along with liberty, human rights, social justice and democracy, were promoted by liberal-progressive intellectuals as the ‘core-values’ of the ‘Hong Kong Myth’, counteracting the rhetoric of patriotism endorsed by China. Part of this liberal-democratic maxim is the Hobbesian argument that defiance of the rule of law would create anarchy (Cammaerts, 2013). In this case, ‘rule of law’ is co-opted as Hong Kong’s predominant ‘core value’,

detached from other liberal values. Chains of equivalence with contextually-conservative ideas of prosperity, social stability and economic development are constructed instead (Lee & Chan, 2018). This is evidenced by the blue-bloc's intertextual slogan — 'stop violence, halt anarchy, protect Hong Kong's prosperity and stability'.

"We lose the freedom as, you know, normal, innocent people to go and shop during weekends (...) Before I go to shop, I have to check the map to see whether it's actually safe and whether there are riots going on. In that sense, many freedoms have actually been taken away by these protesters. So how can you say that it's only just China taking away your freedoms?" (...) Do you want anarchy? Is that a good way for society to function? That's no society. Literally no law, isn't it?". (Keybros, Text 7)

Frames of 'rule of law' and neoliberal ideations were aligned in these sequences as Hong Kong's 'way of life', its *mythical* 'competitive advantage' that requires protection vis-a-vis 'One Country, Two Systems' (Ip, 2020). More than any threat against the now secondary liberal values — 'China taking away *your* freedoms' — protesters were framed as harbingers of chaos because of their neoliberal and legal infringements. In the above sequence, indignation was expressed towards protests as 'public nuisance'; bothersome disruptions were framed as an *injustice* against 'normal, innocent' citizens — the 'we', whose freedom to shop were taken away by the deviant 'you' (Di Cicco, 2010; Gamson, 1992). As will become apparent, 'normality' is key in motivational frames cueing a collective identity.

### *Police*

"It's also very unfair on the police because I feel like most police officers are just trying to do their Jobs, and they don't go out on duty with the intention to harm protestors (...)

When they've got some of their stuff stolen, they actually call the police, which we find kind of hypocritical. You either refuse to actually call the police for help when you hold such a strong negative view about the police or you try to be objective to the police. I think that's fair". (Keybros, Text 6)

"They use imagination to package their ideations, mix hallucinations with reality. We can see this in how they always say 'oh! The police did this, the police did that". (Ivan, Text 4)

Most sequences represented police as 'arbiters' on crime fighting and that protesters' criminality necessitated forceful tactics. As 'non-professionals', KOLs followed what the professional-police decided was procedurally just and distributively fair. In this sense, only official views on the 'murky

use of force incidents' were considered legitimate (Lawrence, 2000), and any second guessing were considered 'hallucinations' or 'imagination' (Text 4). Alternatively, sequences 'counter-attributed' frames of police brutality (Benford & Hunt, 2003). Citing a 'lack of evidence' in an 'institutional problem' arising from inadequate police accountability, brutality is individualised to 'some incidents' of rogue cops (Text 6). Their assertion relies on uncritical and affective assumptions — 'because I feel like' — to associate police with frames of benevolence and normality — 'just trying to do their jobs', 'don't go out on duty with the intention to harm'.

Of particular interest is KOLs' re-framing of events on July 21. Lee *et al.* (2019:10-11) describe how 'thugs in white shirts launched an indiscriminate attack on citizens, some of whom were returning from (protest) rally'; 'The attack injured many and triggered a widespread uproar not only against the thugs but also against the police, because the latter were seen by many as intentionally allowing the attack to happen'. In this vein, police were criticised for arriving at the scene 39 mins late, despite thousands of emergency calls. RTHK, the public broadcasting service, linked some of the 'white shirts' to triads and circulated footage of a riot police officer 'touching the shoulder' of a 'white shirt' (Ho, 2020). The movement popularised the framing of '721' as 'police negligence' and 'collusion'.

Following the 'protest paradigm', KOLs adopted the official rhetoric in disputing an 'indiscriminate attack on citizens', blaming it on protesters for 'stirring up' a confrontation between two 'evenly matched groups' (Text 1), and police unresponsiveness on 'spam' calls (Text 6). Interestingly, one sequence goes beyond official rhetoric via vilification frames, arguing that it is *hypocritical* for protesters to seek help from the police vis-a-vis their heavy criticism of them, notwithstanding the non-protesters present. The textual emphasis on 'fairness' demands anti-systemic activists to withdraw entirely from the system; calls for investigation into police were deemed 'unfair' if one did not simultaneously call for 'investigation into protesters', despite mass arrests (Text 6). In 'fairness', systemic power differentials are obscured, and the status quo is constructed as an even playing field demanding 'fairness from both sides'. Yet the movement, in striving for 'moral concessions' from the hegemon, is placed on a pedestal that deals with extremes — unless it can spot *all* infractions in *every* actor, there is no justification for it to single out a grievance. To be 'fair and objective', 'you can criticise China's human rights only if you do so for every other country' (Text 7). As such, the fetishisation of 'fairness', combined with the placement of counter-hegemonic actors on a higher pedestal vis-a-vis

dominant ones, force the movement to either dilute its focused frames and grievances or concede moral standing in 'hypocrisy'.

### **Diagnostic: The Irrational, Unrealistic Protestor**

A recurring theme found in the sample texts was the deconstruction of solidarity between the moderate 'pro-democrats' and the radical, 'localist' factions. A pivotal entry point was highlighting intra-movement discipline against dissenting opinions vis-a-vis violence:

"These 'yellow ribbons', even if you agree with them on the majority of aspects, as long as you disagree on one aspect, such as violence, they will 'go out and kill you'. It's not democratic, it's a different form of authoritarianism!". (Dominic, Text 2)

The imagery of 'killing disagreement' serves to highlight the hypocrisy in protecting yet restricting freedom of speech. This references movement (and counter-movement) practices of *doxxing*, leaking antagonists' personal information for the purpose of humiliation and intimidation (Hale, 2019), as well as solidarity slogans ('no severing ties') used as conversation stoppers or disciplinary tropes against moderates' questioning of violent tactics. 'Air-con strategist', a label for those providing opinions without frontline participation, was effective in stopping critical debates (Lee, 2020). Correspondingly, movement 'unity' is asymmetrically enforced, and severely weakens the movement's collective self-restraint and correction (ibid.:29).

However, as Lee (2020) emphasises, solidarity is only 'partially' achieved by discipline. During the two-million-strong protest on June 16, and the 1.7-million-strong protest on August 18, 70% and 94.2% of surveyed participants by Chinese University agreed with the statement "When the government fails to *listen*, the use of radical tactics is understandable" (Lee, 2019). As such, public receptiveness towards radicalisation is achieved via shared grievances: In Sep 2019, 80% of respondents supported the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry, while 75% supported the re-initiation of democratic reforms (ibid). Sympathisers cared about whether they are 'heard', regardless of means of 'expression'.

## *Irrational Psychology*

KOLs recognise this, so in addition to protest tactics, they counter-frame movement demands. However, some do not engage with its complexities, preferring to blanket them with psychological buzzwords:

“‘Black violence’, under the careful manipulation of background handlers, are easily susceptible to psychological changes (...) completely overhauling their cognitive systems and values thinking. Their core values will be controlled by ideas of ‘fake democracy’, turning them into religious followers (...)

In their state of ‘unconsciousness’, their ability to think critically and independently is impaired. They do not know how to fine tune their emotions, because they are too young, and become depressed. They will ignore the society’s realities and their own societal conditions, to blindly search for heights that they will never reach”. (Ivan, Text 4)

In these excerpts, ‘democracy’ is framed as a mental impairment — ‘irrational’, ‘illogical’, a religious cult — ‘fake’, ‘blind’, and associated with teens. All three fit into the construction of ‘folk devils’, precluding complex explanations of motivations and defining them as ‘outsiders’ to the social system; the possibility that they are ‘respectably employed, or committed to positive change within society’ is ignored in favour of the threat they pose to the social order, as ‘out of control youths’ (Donson *et al.*, 2004:11). The motif of cognitive ‘illness’ is also strengthened by disinformation on drug use:

“Their medicine packs allegedly contains ecstasy or other excitement-inducing drugs, so now we all know why protestors don’t fear death, as if they’ve entered a state of frenzy and excitement, maybe some of the drugs I’m talking about are the ones reports have talked about”. (Dominic, Text 1)

“They stubbornly use their familial relationships to threaten family members to join them, create a sense of fatherly, motherly familial closeness, and these thugs will use this to target our elderly and adults. Our elderly and adults will fall into blind trust”. (Ivan, Text 4).

Crucially, in semantics of ‘incited’, ‘frenzy and excitement’, movement goals are constructed as a manifestation of ‘mindlessness’, with two effects. First, it invokes a ‘moral battery’ for counter-action: disruptive reflex fears are activated via affective commitments to ‘our teens’ (Text 4), combined with the cued compassion from the plight of elderlies targeted for manipulation. Second, ‘mindlessness’ contributes to the removal of agency within protesters: The crucial implication here is that protester’s

demands are consequently framed as *externally* orchestrated by ‘background handlers’. This implies little need to engage with local antecedent conditions.

### *Pragmatism*

Several texts allude to movement goals, but stress *pragmatism* in recognising what ‘you’ have achieved, and compromise in order to ‘diffuse the situation’ (Text 6):

“Refusing to engage the government even after the government has retreated the bill is actually creating a vicious cycle, there’s this saying, 得寸進尺, which means you actually tried to go to the furthest extent (...) they’re trying to push the government into basically an unachievable corner and that should be condemned.

退一步,海闊天空, which means if you actually take a step back, it actually broadens your perspective and actually creates more opportunities (...) standing very firmly against a side which is already kind of compromised, it is kind of unfair”. (Keybros, Text 6)

Cited idioms make the strange appear familiar, turning complex social events into generalised fables. In this case, social struggle is de-contextualised into a commonplace squabble, where characters are evenly matched and governed by market-like conduct. Fetishised ‘fairness’ re-frames movement demands as condemnable for deviant market-behaviour — ‘we gave you *one*, it’s unfair if you don’t give *one* back.’ The *one*, however, is evaluated purely quantitatively, notwithstanding the opinion surveys that showed withdrawing the Bill was insufficient to de-escalate protests due to the shifting of agenda (Lee, 2019).

Condemnation of desires to ‘go further’ invokes Hong Kong’s once-prevalent societal discourses of pragmatism. Following Ip (2020), past officials have made discursive appeals to the ‘pragmatic majority’ of Hong Kong. This pragmatic discourse posited that political change would be achieved gradually, as radical claims would provoke counter-productive reactions from China (Lam & Cooper, 2017). As such, political conflicts were fragmented into *apolitical* contentions to placate the *familial-oriented* and *materialistic* Hong-Kongers who would concentrate on seizing economic opportunities. By invoking these politically-passive ideations, KOLs evoke the return to the 1980s view of Hong Kong society as an ‘inward-looking’ and ‘atomistic society with apolitical orientations’ (Ip, 2020:24).

### *Misguided Status Quo*

In the sampled texts, democracy was counter-framed as unrealistic and unattainable, while the status quo was simultaneously celebrated. These frames amplify the protesters' misguidedness in striving for change, representing protests as *impotent* and *ungrateful* towards enjoyed freedoms (Di Cicco, 2010).

"In the US you have the Electoral College, the UK, the House of Lords, which is entirely unelected. Clinton won the popular vote, but Trump won the presidency. So I mean, is there universal suffrage? The US is also a flawed democracy. Obviously, we accept that it's higher than Hong Kong, but it shows that it's very hard to become a very, so-called, full democracy, only perhaps Scandinavian countries can achieve that. (...) We compare this to colonial times where the governor has all been appointed by the Crown, we at least have some amount of democracy. So I don't think it's that unequal as to we are living in an authoritarian state at the moment". (Keybros, Text 6)

Chains of equivalence were constructed between Hong Kong's lack of universal suffrage and Western countries' perceived infractions of this principle. Such 'western benchmarks', like electoral college and Lords, were framed as similarly aberrant to the 'one person one vote' principle as the Hong Kong system. The assertion that some states are 'higher' on the democracy scale than Hong Kong is 'accepted', but the focal point is nonetheless placed on systems' inconsistencies with movement ideations. Furthermore, the antecedent status quo is juxtaposed with colonial times to evidence Hong Kong's quantitative increase in freedoms. Laced with pragmatic overtones, movement demands are framed as misguided because (a) Hong Kong has sufficient (neoliberal) freedoms and (b) not many countries can conform to a fully-fledged polyarchy with inclusive suffrage, free elections, and the right for all citizens to run for public office (Dahl, 1989). The latter aspect is used to establish discursive links between disqualified candidates and neo-Nazis to affect moral shame, notwithstanding the fact that officials disqualified incumbent legislators in July 2020 for 'pledging to vote down the government's budget' (Cheung *et al.*, 2020).

Beyond electoral models, KOLs also emphasise the growing number of illiberal democracies in which majorities have eroded separations of power and human rights. India, which is briefly mentioned 'as a good example' (Text 7), is ruled by BJP, which advocates for Hindutva and anti-Muslim policies (Banaji *et al.*, 2019). Such counter-frames can be effective in fracturing moderates' solidarity vis-a-vis international support. Endorsements from Trump or Republican senators, who criticised Hong

Kong's police brutality but called for the US military to 'quash (BLM) protests due to zero tolerance for anarchy and rioting' (Elegant, 2020), rings of hypocrisy. KOLs featuring these stories evoked questions as to whether international support has a more pragmatic, rather than moral purpose.

### **Diagnostic: Foreign Intervention**

Diagnostics sketched throughout this discussion can be stitched together into a picture of foreign intervention. In all the sample texts, Western powers are portrayed as either 'orchestrating the revolution', 'training military operations', 'background handlers', or con artists of 'fake democracy':

"US hopes to turn the current Hong Kong situation into one akin to IRA in Northern Ireland, to target and assassinate police and politicians. There's a lot of historical cases in which the US is supporting rebels in Africa or Middle East. (...) So, American government, please stop making trouble! You're close to destroying Hong Kong! When will you stop? You're turning the world into chaos, what's the benefit of all this for the US? Why must you always make trouble in other countries?" (Dominic, Text 1)

Counter-frames attach the movement financially, organisationally and ideologically to the West, and protesters are thus nominalised as agency-less 'chess-pieces' or agential traitors. Discursively, KOLs constructed plausibility via (a) de-contextualised analogies to 'coloured revolutions' and Western-sponsored coups, (b) contextualised meetings between pro-democracy figures and Western political actors, and (c) funding between US-based agencies and local NGOs. Lee & Chan (2018:153) argue that the *externalisation* of movement cause serves to de-legitimise movements as 'dubious and alien', and legitimise any crackdown as patriotic. Commenting on the 2014 protests, these authors argue that while links between local political groups and 'foreign forces' were not entirely fabricated, they were arguably normal for an international city, as such it would be 'far fetched' to consider it as evidence for 'foreign infiltration'. To this end, KOLs embellished accuracy via direct cries of indignation towards Western powers — 'please stop making trouble!' — constructing a sense of powerlessness in 'normal Hong Kongers' vis-a-vis powerful nations, delivered in close proximity and direct gaze to increase modality and affect.

### **Prognostic**

In all the sampled texts, the main prognosis was to install in the public discourse the 'truth' about the movement— an all-powerful, foreign-trained, irrational and misguided military with tendencies to

silence dissent and enact vigilante justice. In turn, KOLs perceived the major obstacle as the ‘mainstream media’, which they saw as creating fake news to help protesters. ‘They don’t report the stories they should be reporting, and report the ones they shouldn’t’ (Text 1). Interestingly, they cite the ‘mainstream’ as ‘sources from Google’, and ‘alternatives’ as the pro-Beijing press (Text 2). This contradicts Lee’s (2018) typology of Hong Kong media, in which most are owned by ‘business people sharing the same interest in appeasing the Chinese government’. The reason KOLs cite democratic-media as ‘mainstream’, therefore, is because of their popularity, rather than ownership; movement-aligned media serves as ‘first publishers’ to publicise critical viewpoints and sensitive information, thereby maintaining a degree of heterogeneity in Hong Kong’s public discourse.

As such, the self-mediation of counter-diagnostic frames, to the extent that resonates beyond movement-frames, becomes KOLs’ prognosis. Following the MOS, KOLs capitalise on platform affordances to encourage viewers to ‘share more, subscribe to our channels, to receive information that the mainstream media doesn’t want you to know’ (Text 3). Consequently, social media interactions and participation in KOL-networked-publics is framed as prognostic ‘anti-brainwashing’ (Text 4) — a cure that allows ‘us’ to ‘speak up’ and confront the powerful ‘propaganda apparatus’ that silences ‘our’ dissent (Text 4).

## Motivational

The KOL-cued ‘we’ is defined via juxtaposition to its ‘constitutive outside’, established by chains of equivalence that link diagnostic signifiers to the marked ‘Other’ (Derrida, 1978; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In this vein, the cued-‘we’ is *not* irrational, misguided, violent, law-breaking, brainwashed, or a traitor. ‘We’ are the ‘productive silent majority’, ‘the camp of *normal* Hong-Kongers’ (Text 3), and ‘we’ think ‘what most people in Hong Kong think’ (Text 6).

Following Jasper’s (2018) ‘moral battery’, this counter-collective identity actualises mobilisation potential on two fronts. First, the ‘we’ is constructed to be silenced by the ‘mainstream’, as public admittance of ‘productive’ beliefs is accompanied by affective cues of *shame*, and the status quo is framed as a muffling ‘echo chamber’:

“I expressed the view that violent acts cannot be accepted in society, and then I was ‘bombed’ in a frenzy. No one will talk because they are afraid of being ostracised (...) their propaganda machine is really scary. Everyone is afraid of being ostracised, of being boycotted, of being bullied’. (Dominic, Text 2)

However, shame is 'charged' by the affect of deontological *pride* in being 'correct', as part of the 'constituted inside'. Some sequences marked diagnostic signifiers on the Other in a strictly partisan manner, while others relied on frames of 'neutrality' to get to the same conclusion. In the latter, the foregrounding of how 'we' don't 'confine ourselves in either camp, and are rather centrist' (Text 6,7), inscribes the 'fairness' fetishisation and gives one's hyper-traditional ideals a bipartisan sheen. When aligned with false victimhood, 'neutrality' is framed as in-group superiority which affords the cued 'us' with clairvoyance and moral invulnerability.

KOLs also cue the *agency* of the counter-collective identity via the activation of communal bonds, telling viewers to sign up to remove protesters' blockades in groups, and encouraging them to take photos of protesters' faces in order to report them to the police (Text 3). If resonant, these practices of shared meaning-making vis-a-vis the 'ideological enemy' can contribute to the relational enactment of the KOL-cued 'we' (Melucci, 1995).

### **Micro-Celebrity**

Vlogs were conducive to 'self-brand' *normality* due to affordances for micro-celebrity practices in relatability, authenticity and accountability. The setting of vlogs, filmed in front of family portraits, hobbies (guitars) or a messy workplace (Text 1,2), made the videos highly personal, cultivating a sense of authenticity via transparency to their audience. Furthermore, the centrality of the KOL within the camera frame, and his narrow distance from the camera, created an atmosphere of intimate discussion that fosters familiarity. Relatability was strengthened by 'audience interactions', such as Ivan devoting his video to fans who wrote in (Text 4), thus contrasting with the perceived sensationalism of 'mainstream' media (Marwick, 2016). Intertextually, 'normality' is embellished via links to non-political, quotidian vlogs in food or travel.

"I wanted to film this video because of an email I recieved from a fan, her family all really support the police, and strongly dislikes 'black violence'. She hopes 'fat boy kit' can film a video about brainwashing and she can show it to her parents". (Ivan, Text 4)

"I was once yellow, and now I'm blue – those who are anti-violence and desire social stability (...) even though there are a lot of people who disagree with the 'yellow', they don't have the courage to speak out. It took a lot of courage for me to voice out my opinions. I had a friend who was 'deep yellow', and when she watched my videos, she was like 'oh, you're not just blindly supporting the police! You have your logic and reason'". (Dominic, Text 2)

Concurrently, KOLs built accountability by telling highly affective and personal stories. These took the form of 'ideological testimonials' — moments of 'awakenings' from the 'fallacies' of the 'yellow-bloc'. In Text 3, Dominic's co-host Allison re-framed movement frames as victim mentality, to 'blame the government for everything', and told the story of 'switching sides' as empowerment — regaining her courage and voice for social stability. Following Lewis (2018), ideological testimonials, as affective and personal narratives, are authentic and relatable, but above all accountable, since 'lived experiences' cannot be easily fact-checked. Furthermore, in sequences containing more than one KOL, the sense of 'silent majority' is constructed via affirmative gestures, verbal agreement and engrossed facial expressions (Text 2, 6,7).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to critically deconstruct the discursive strategies of counter-protesting Key Opinion Leaders in relation to their framing of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and what their self-mediation entails vis-a-vis the constitution of a counter-collective identity, engagement with initial frames and broader discourses, as well as interactions with technological-material affordances. As such, it hopes to bridge literature on M-CM dynamics and constructivist theories on social movement constitution, elucidating a multilateral war of position yet emphasising its contextual dimensions.

Through an audio-visual CDA of seven YouTube sequences, this paper has argued that KOLs align with collective action frames of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational, in constructing a 'knowledge-prism' through which one makes sense of the world according to the counter-movement. KOLs frame the social movement as their primary diagnostic, representing protesters as 'violent and criminalised', 'irrational, unrealistic and misguided', and brainwashed as chess-pieces of foreign powers. In highlighting how their opinions are admirably 'normal' yet, paradoxically, deviant from the 'mainstream', KOLs framed ideological dissemination as the prognosis itself, utilising technological affordances and micro-celebrity appeal to encourage social media participation. Correspondingly, a collective 'we' is cued as the 'constituted inside' vis-a-vis the diagnostic and deviant 'them', strengthened by motivational hallmarks of neutrality, correctness and false victimhood.

These findings are consistent with the literature on framing biased against social movements. KOLs follow the 'protest paradigm' in highlighting protest violence and adopting official rhetoric, as well as marginalising, demonising and de-legitimising protests and protesters, via semantics akin to concepts of 'folk devils'. Referencing the 'public nuisance paradigm', the Hong Kong protests were represented as bothersome — infringements on neoliberal freedoms, impotent — misguided and impractical, and unpatriotic — ingratitude towards existing freedoms in search for the unachievable. In doing so, KOLs laced frames with emotional cues targeting ones' affective commitments, triggering epistemic and existential fears vis-a-vis the marked Other. Concurrently, KOLs channelled myths (of Hong Kong's core values), inter-textual narrations (in idioms) and broader discourses of nationalism and neoliberalism to counter-frame movement ideations.

However, this paper has acknowledged the constitution of collective identity as far more than a transmission of meaning from media texts to audiences. Instead, this paper aimed to address how a counter-movement collective identity was *cued* and *represented* by KOLs, as discerning complex processes of self-construction would require interactive research methods, such as interviews, that are more suited for bypassing the barrier of 'linguistic determinism' (Breeze, 2011). Concurrently, in today's digitised world, meaning-making is multi-modal, and distinct boundaries are collapsed — future studies could complement CDA with social network analysis to visualise networked antagonisms and communal interactions on YouTube comment sections. Moreover, this paper's thematic approach to empirical presentation obscures differences in 'leadership styles' — subsequent research could engage with KOLs' varying constructions of superiority vis-a-vis their audiences, or how sociological characteristics are distinguished in a saturated field. Finally, it would be enlightening to extend this work from an M-CM focus to CM-State — this paper has touched on tensions such as neutrality v. partisan, or calls for more robust police response, but there remains space for the deconstruction of the hegemonic umbrella.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Sampled Videos

#### Text 1:

Lee, D. [李梓敬] (2020, Jan 18) 20-1-18 “美國軍火援助香港勇武，暗殺警方陰謀曝光？勇武派廣州嫖妓到失聯，媒體點解唔報?.”, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg01rDlFA6Q> (Accessed: 3 August 2020).

Translated title: “US supplying arms to Hong Kong radicals, plot to assassinate police revealed? radical protestors hiring prostitutes in Guangzhou and lost contact, why isn't the media reporting?”

#### Text 2:

Lee, D. [李梓敬] (2020, Jan 21) “點樣說服身邊朋友，由黃絲變藍絲？Allison 親身經驗大剖白!.”, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB20U5rpEyM> (Accessed: 4 August 2020).

Translated Title: “How to convince friends around you, to turn from ‘yellow-ribbon’ to ‘blue ribbon’? Sharing Allison's personal experience!”

#### Text 3:

Lee, D. [李梓敬] (2020, May 11) “拆解美國三大毒招，令黑暴時代重臨？513 係 1113 羅伯慘死半週年，正常香港人，你唔係唔悼念掛?.”, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCZ5YBu\\_ivw&t=40s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCZ5YBu_ivw&t=40s) (Accessed: 4 August 2020).

Translated Title: “Revealing the US' three ‘poisonous tactics’, to bring back ‘the dynasty of black violence’; 13<sup>th</sup> May is the semi-anniversary of ‘elderly’ Law’s painful death (at the hand of protestors), normal Hong Kongers, why aren't you mourning?”

#### Text 4:

Mok, I. [肥仔傑] (2020, Jan 12) “分析黃絲被洗腦的過程和心理變化 | 止暴制亂還要配合心理治療 | 【肥仔傑·論政】.”, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWxO4akS2-E> (Accessed: 3 August 2020).

Translated Title: “Analysing ‘Yellow-Ribbons’ brainwashing process and psychological changes; stopping violence and chaos needs to be accompanied with mental health treatment”

#### Text 5:

Mok, I. [肥仔傑] (2020, Jan 4) “黑衫的軍事級架構曝光 | 組織性極強 | 【肥仔傑·論政】.”, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI76TXjQMWg> (Accessed: 29 July 2020).

Translated Title: “Revealing the military structure of ‘black-shirts’! Highly organised and powerful! Fat Boy Kit on Politics”

#### Text 6:

Keybros. (2020, Jun 18) “Joshua Wong DW Interview Exposed with FACTS AND LOGIC.” Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4az\\_PN92PU&t=562s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4az_PN92PU&t=562s) (Accessed: 5 August 2020).

#### Text 7:

Keybros (2020, June 29) “Denise Ho UN Speech Exposed with FACTS AND LOGIC.” Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpCp7uqLN14> (Accessed: 31 August 2020).

Appendix 2: Annotated Sample Texts

Text 3

— textual

— discursive

— societal

— collective identity / identification

Breaking down America's three strategies for bringing back Hong Kong's 'dynasty of black violence'  
 — Dominic Lee Tsz King

I hope all of you will press subscribe for free in the bottom-right corner, comment, like, and share this video as widely as you can, in order for citizens to understand the truth that mainstream media doesn't want you to know. Now why didn't Tsz-King release any videos these two days? Well, as it's mother's day I've been very busy gifting flowers to our dear Hong Kong citizens, so apologies for the delay.

Now I wanted to talk about what happened yesterday, on Mother's Day, Hong Kong's pandemic situation has slightly soothed, and cases of local COVID contraction over the past few days has actually reached about zero. But of course, during this celebratory moment where we all hoped Hong Kong would get a breather, these 'black violence' have unsurprisingly refused to allow this to happen.

Yesterday was Mother's Day, it should've been a day of universal celebration, where everyone should happily celebrate with their families, yet who could predict that 'black violence' would choose this day to attack? Now, they had originally planned to apply for a mass demonstration in Kowloon, but of course under pandemic situations the police would not issue the 'Letter of No Objection', and objected to any demonstration or gathering.

In this case, the organiser obviously had to postpone, but of course this didn't stop their determination to kill off ("render dead") Mother's Day. So these netizens proposed to have 'Sing with You' at around 3pm yesterday afternoon, in multiple shopping malls across the city; including Harbour City, Kwun Tong's APM, Kowloon Tong's Festival Walk, Mongkok's Grand Century Plaza, Causeway Bay's Time Square, and Taikoo Shing etc. etc. Now, under the new leadership of Police Commissioner Chris Tang, there are new strategies against this group of 'black violence', including precautionary placement of police at these malls, and once they see suspicious people — don't discuss too much, halt them and search them first, and if there are suspicious materials such as multiple Octopus Cards, face masks etc, take them all to the police station. This will limit the amount of people going into malls trying to make trouble, and weaken their voice.

Now these tactics have obvious effects, as at 3pm yesterday, actually very little people turned up. At every mall there was about 'a few tens' (of people) to about a hundred. So they completely could not build momentum or voice. At one mall there was probably too little people for them to even have the courage to sing! Now about 3 to 4pm, some malls started to have larger gatherings, but by large I mean about 'hundred and a few tens', but it is obvious that police have been much more proactive than before, not letting these people gather and make trouble — while their numbers are still small, police take this advantage of this and send more anti-riot police.

I have seen a lot of netizens praise our police for being decisive and effective. But while yesterday the 'black violence' failed to cause a large-scale riot, only conducting 'work' such as blocking a few roads, some flashmobs, and 'sing with you', for me this is still extremely worrying. This is because I see the 'black violence' adopting a different tactic, to turn Hong Kong back to the 'dynasty of black violence'.

Now, which strategies did they use to intensify the atmosphere and build up the momentum for riots?

target audience  
- kept in the dark by mainstream media  
- victim of a conspiracy

incomparable to protest during Covid → ruthless, wouldn't even give a break to the city suffering covid.  
- 'we', something All HK-ers wanted.

framing the correct police action: regardless of procedural justice ⇒ the end result of 'peace' facilitates procedural justice.

aggregating protests into a term, emphasising violence: 暴徒; black controlled their shirt colour, death and danger.

agency: unprompted attacks; decontextualised.

framing / de-legitimising protest numbers in HK itself as the lack of support for the protest.

collective ridiculous.  
- lack of courage  
'inferential' framework  
small numbers will grow to mass if not stopped.  
justifying solution

construction of the 'enemy' in mainstream media  
- subject of sentence given agency to m. media as aggressor

emphasis on 'Mother's Day' as the target of protesters  
- connotations of family, stability, happiness  
- all threatened by protesters  
- something originally possible without protestor's influence.

framed peaceful protest as the precursor to violence, threatening

PROGNOSIS

framing of public nuisance

contaminating public support / majority opinions

uncertainty - inducing from a 'different' / fresh tactic ⇒ stir fear.

connotation of time:  
- the permanence of protests; never-ending  
- the power of protesters over ordinary citizens; like 'kings' muling over other people  
→ marginalised 'counter-protest'

rule of law frame? → no implicit distinction with violent protests.

At the very beginning, the rioters, as you can see in the social movement, will not use the most fierce or the most violent acts to start with. So you will not see scenes like last year at Chinese University or Polytechnic University. They will adopt tactics that the public may believe — they are pretending to be gentle — such as gathering frontline-protectors to 'Sing with You'. Now 'Sing with You' is just singing at malls, now we might think there's not much threat or lethality, so it will attract those sympathisers or non-violent protestors. But actually, via these acts, they will slowly gather the frontline-protectors, slowly 'heat up' the riot, to warm up the movement. Well, if from the very beginning you tell people to throw bricks or throw petrol bombs, then maybe not a lot of citizens will support. So you start from 'shallow' before going 'deep' — now this shows they have strategic planning.

construction of a 'imagined' public that does not have the correct 'information sources'

the facade of peaceful protest as a trick  
inferential framework = predicting the escalation from peaceful to violence

↳ cantonese phrase to legitimate the 'tactic'

↳ implied professionalisation

quantitative emphasis on image to counter 'fantasy unrealistic'

Moreover, it was very common in the Anti-Extradition Bill protests to see the rioters use 'temporary actors' to play different roles, to smear the police and the government. This includes children, female frontline-protectors, or people playing the role of 'the elderly'. Yesterday I saw a lot of them, the first being the 13 year old child who claimed to be a journalist, wearing a 'journalist vest'. Now Tsz-King has told you all that the 'fake journalists' problem in Hong Kong is very serious — the existence of this 13 year-old journalist, or so he claims, is evidence of how serious this problem is. As long as you wear this vest you can be a journalist, does this not show that the government needs to enact legislation to monitor the status of a journalist? And then there is the tactic of pushing female frontline-protectors to the front. Now when they are arrested they exclaim and then when they are filmed they put on this face to induce pity. Well, it was you who came out! Once you are arrested you pretend to be oppressed. The [mainstream media] will of course help them, saying 'wow, even kids and female frontline-protectors are being arrested, now this pretty girl is being arrested no one will know what will happen back in the police station', and create fake news. This is their most common strategy. On Mother's Day they arranged some temporary actors to play the role of 'elderly', now of course they are actually old, but they are pretending to be having dinner with their family, and then complain about the police in front of the cameras. As such, we need to bust them before this strategy matures, that's why we should tell our friends, and share this video as widely as possible, because citizens must know about their tactics.

implied aims; rejection of movement goals

'concentrated' strategies to link protests to ideas of professionalisation

alms of like a costume.

- identification of dishonesty in 'fake journalists'

lack of agency

→ anti-mainstream media.

rule of law frame

blame on mainstream media.

motif of actors.

objectification of protesting as strategy

AGENCY

→ motivational calls for action, to do something about it.

characterisation of counter-protesters as detective / law-enforcement. maturity → implied permanence

direct calls for help and person perspective

What can citizens do? I think citizens can do two things. During the Anti-Extradition Bill riots, 'productive energy' like us, our camp — the camp of normal Hong Kongers, had really terrible promotional materials. That's why in late November to December, Tsz-King started KOL100. Now we have a lot of channels, a lot of people voicing out their views. It's more, but it's not enough, and so we need your help to share this video out, especially this one, because this is about their strategies.

micro-celebrity - promoting KOL100 → encourage participation

AGENCY - relational empowerment of collective identity.

That's why you need to share more, and subscribe to our channels and continue to support us, so you can receive information that the mainstream media doesn't want you to know. Second, these 'black violence' hate being caught on camera, so we must, at a safe distance, take photos of them. So I recommend that we, at the places where the 'black violence' likes to show up, such as Shatin or Mongkok Nathan Road, which is quite near residential areas, to take photos of them. Especially now,

foregrounding dangers of protestors

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