

Political Polarization and Relationship Dissolution on Social Media among Hong Kong Students during the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

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Abstract

Hong Kong's controversy over the Anti-extradition Bill Movement triggered a large-scale social movement, which gradually evolved from relatively peaceful demonstrations to a prolonged series of conflicts and even street violence. Hong Kong students are the most front-line participants. Social media are important platforms for youth political mobilization and organization. The growing political polarization on social media has led to a series of problems such as political unfriending and even cyberbullying. This study interviewed 96 students to investigate their practices of political unfriending on social media, to analyse the psychological pressure and possible cyberbullying caused by such online participatory action towards political dissidents, and to explore ways for government, schools, parents, and other stakeholders to guide students to break their information cocoons by exposing to different political ideologies in a more inclusive manner for a healthier development of democracy in Hong Kong.

Keywords

Political Polarization, Relationship Dissolution, Social Media, Hong Kong Students, Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

1. Introduction

Hong Kong's controversy over The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill, hereafter referred to as the Anti-extradition Bill Movement, started in June last year, triggering a

large-scale social movement, which gradually evolved from relatively peaceful demonstrations to a prolonged series of conflicts and even street violence. This so-called Anti-extradition Bill Movement has brought a series of political, economic, social and cultural problems to Hong Kong. Among them, the social conflicts and cleavage caused by differences in political opinions and stances are particularly serious. The movement is believed to bring about a deeply divided society with torn relationships both online and offline, posing new challenges to the effective governance of the government.

This prolonged anti-extradition bill movement highlights three characteristics of Hong Kong's political movements in recent years (Meng, 2018): firstly, the active participation of young students; secondly, social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram as important platforms for their political mobilization and organization; thirdly, the growing political polarization on social media that has led to a series of problems such as the unfriending.

Hong Kong's youth have been at the forefront of the city's biggest and most violent protests in decades. According to the Hong Kong police, nearly 4000 students have been arrested for their involvement in the illegal activities since the start of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Among them, 55% are university students and the rest 45%, most of whom are under the age of 18, are middle school students and some are even primary school students (HKEJ, 2020).

Social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Telegram are important platforms for youth political mobilization and organization. Various forms of online political participation are translated into the offline engagement. The growing political polarization on social media has led to a series of problems such as political unfriending and online relationship dissolution among Hong Kong students.

Relationship dissolution on social media includes unfriending, unfollowing or hiding, etc. The dissolution of relationships due to different political ideologies is a common phenomenon in the past social movements in Hong Kong. It is widely believed and empirically approved that such online dissolution causes discomfort, distress, and even psychological harm to those being unfriended. At the same time, unfriending on social media is also an indirect behavior of political gesture and participation. What's more, it can also be used as a kind of online bullying to exclude or eliminate the political dissidents.

It is important to understand the causes, processes, patterns, and effects of students' political participation in the new media environment. The aim of this study is to explore political polarization and relationship dissolution on social media in the Anti-extradition Bill Movement through the questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with students in Hong Kong.

2. Literature Review

This study is to review the existing literature in the following three interrelated areas.

2.1. Social Media Use as Youth Political Participation

Youth have played a visible and prominent role in the political activities and policy debates in Hong Kong and their participation in political activities is bolstered by social media. As earlier and easier adopters of new technologies, they use social media to share information, mobilize emotion and action, and translate various forms of online political participation into offline engagement (HKIAPS, 2017).

The use of new media by youth in Hong Kong has shown the characteristics of popularization, mobility, and socialization (Meng, 2018). They have easy access to the Internet. Smartphones and social media are fully integrated into their daily work and life. Social networking has become one of the most popular ways for them to contact and communicate with the outside world, which has changed and enriched the forms of political participation of Hong Kong Youth. The major forms of youth political participation include online political crowdfunding (raising election funds), political spoofing (gaining entertainment from politics in a humorous way), political group formation (establishing online political groups), and political mobilization (promoting collective actions both online and offline) (Meng, 2018). The pattern and path of ideological and political education of college students become a crucial study project in the domain of ideological and political education (Gong & Zuo, 2020).

Youth in Hong Kong have demonstrated their aspiration and potential to be agents of social change. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 is regarded as a turning point in youth political orientation from a peaceful, rational, and non-violent approach expressing concerns within the norms of the establishment to an anti-establishment approach that employed more assertive means and not excluding radical behavior, distrust of the HKSAR and mainland authorities and assertion of radical localism (HKIAPS, 2017; Lee et al., 2017; Chan, 2016).

Lee et al. (2017) studied the social media use and university students' participation in the Umbrella Movement and divided the online and offline political actions into collective action participation, digital participation, and personalized action participation. Shen, Xia, & Skoric (2020) proposed that in the context of a specific social movement, expressive behaviours such as posting protest-related information, discussing with others, and mobilizing others to participate on social media should be conceptualized as a form of participation. Agur & Frisch (2019) probes the catalytic features of social media in civic participation and mass civil disobedience in Hong Kong's 2014 protests, and conceptualizes digital activism in terms of mobilization, organization, and persuasion. Lee et al. (2020) examined levels of social media use and how social media use relates to protest attitudes—persistence, pessimism, and radicalism—among young people during movement abeyance. Reichert (2021) explored forms of online and offline participation adopted by university students in Hong Kong who were surveyed shortly before the anti-extradition bill social movement of 2019 and one year later.

2.2. Online Relationships Establishment, Maintenance and Dissolution

Although a large part of the adult population has taken part in huge protest marches, the protest movement has been sustained by the energy of school and university students, but also radicalized by the violence of a minority of them that has the tacit support of the majority (Purbrick, 2019). Ku (2020) looks at the causes, manifestations and outcomes of the changing forms of youth activism in the movement and highlights the young protesters' political agency in harnessing a range of local, diasporic and international resources to steer this leaderless movement, and the path-breaking strategies and results that have emerged. Lee et al. (2020) explicates how the solidarity has been produced, maintained, and negotiated because the solidarity has contributed to the movement's sustainability and played important roles in its dynamic evolution. Lai-LaGrotteria (2023) examined the impacts of mass protests on social relationships, economic development, and mental and physical health of Hong Kong students.

Numerous studies have shown that social media, especially social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter are tools that promote the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Ross, Reese, & Zin, 2005; Tong & Walther, 2011). They have been extensively studied through the lens of social capital which is usually defined as the accumulated resources derived from the relationships among people within a specific social context or network (Steinfeld et al., 2012). It also enables individuals with social anxiety to interact with others in a more comfortable social environment (Forest & Wood, 2012). However, online friendships on social networks may be relatively fragile. A recent study revealed that 27% of social media users have hidden or deleted their previously agreed friends in social networks (Duggan & Smith, 2016). This phenomenon of online breakup is so common that the New Oxford American Dictionary announced "unfriend" as its annual vocabulary in 2009. The theory of affective news was used to examine social media live streaming during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement (Fang & Cheng, 2022). Su et al. (2022) investigated the messages and chats of the movement on the public channels of the social media platform Telegram.

The act of unfriending describes the process of deleting a friend on a social networking site, in order to no longer maintain this bond. It is considered conscious, purposeful, and unilaterally removes the connection between two individuals (Sibona, 2014). This implies the increased difficulty of contacting the person in the future.

In addition to dissolving friend relationships, social media also provides a hidden option, which can be seen as a gentler breakup, that is, one user "hides" future posts from another user, but they can still maintain "friendship". When one user hides another, the latter will not be notified about being unfriended. It may be less hurtful to be hidden, in contrast to being unfriended. Twitter also has a feature similar to Facebook's "hide post" called the "mute button", which

allows users to remove an account's tweets from their timeline without unfollowing them. Unfollowing occurs when you hide all posts from a specific person, page, or group without unfriending them.

The review of relevant literature identifies some popular reasons for online relationship dissolution. A user may unfriend or unfollow someone due to controversial posts regarding topics such as politics, religion, and society that do not agree with the user's own opinions. [Sibona & Walcazek \(2011\)](#) identified six main reasons why people unfriend others on Facebook. One of the reasons that causes online relationship dissolution is polarizing posts. This kind of information avoidance comes from psychology in studies on selective exposure, where people tend to avoid information that challenges their own beliefs, because this kind of information creates cognitive dissonance ([Sweeny et al., 2010](#)).

The act of unfriending has gained public recognition as an impactful political gesture ([John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015](#)). Across the world, there is a growing online movement calling for people to unfriend contacts who do not agree with their political views. In Hong Kong, 30% of the participants in the Umbrella Movement have been dismissed from others because of political differences in the fight for greater autonomy ([Lee & Chan, 2016](#)). Unfriending was found more prevalent among more ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users. Weak ties were most likely to be broken, and respondents mostly unfriended people because they took offense at what they had posted or disagreed with it ([John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015](#)).

Online relationship dissolution can lead to real life consequences. Being unfriended is usually believed to trigger negative emotion which can be defined as "an affect-laden state that is aversive and psychologically stressful" ([Bevan & Hale, 2006: p. 365](#)). Common emotional responses to being unfriended include surprise, disappointment, bothered, amusement, and sadness. However, unfriending others sometimes trigger either no emotions or even positive emotions because some people feel their privacy has been protected after unfriending another user or simply feel "free" and unburdened ([Sibona, 2014](#)).

In Hong Kong, social media have been turned into battlegrounds for warring opinions for and against the localist movements in the past years and provoked "unfriending", an innovative form of everyday networked activism in which people "unfriended" a friend with different political views on SNS and in the real world ([Ting, 2019](#)). Around 30% of the protestors "unfriended" other people on Facebook during the Umbrella Movement ([Lee & Chan, 2016](#)), sometimes even including their family members. [Lau et al. \(2016\)](#) made a study on social media and mental health in democracy movement in Hong Kong. They tested a novel hypothesis that social resource loss on social media (e.g., "unfriending") may be associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in social upheaval. But their study revealed that the positive association between social resource loss on social media and depressive symptoms was significant only among middle-aged and older adults but not younger adults because age moderated the

positive association between social resource loss on social media and depressive symptoms.

2.3. Information Cocoons, Echo Chambers and Political Polarization

Media content is becoming increasingly personalized in the digital age. Such personalization has led to worries that people can lock themselves in information cocoons: firstly, people prefer to encounter information that is supportive of their existing beliefs (Stroud, 2008, 2010). They will avoid information that challenges their beliefs. Secondly, when social media users select friends and join groups or fan pages, they are more likely to be exposed to information that is the same or similar to their beliefs, interests, ideas, and values (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Therefore, social media such as Facebook and Twitter make it easy for users to form information cocoon rooms in which they are surrounded by people with the same views (Himmelboim, Hansen, & Bowser, 2013). Thirdly, this selective exposure process is further reinforced by social media analytic algorithms that ensure posts from close friends and from news media they favour will rank higher on the newsfeeds.

The echo chamber is a similar concept of the information cocoons. It is a metaphorical description of a situation in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system due to a harmonious group of people amalgamating and developing tunnel vision. Participants in on-line discussions may find their opinions constantly echoed back to them, which reinforces their individual belief systems due to the declining exposure to other's opinion.

Studies reveal that most of the information contacted by Hong Kong youth on social media is consistent with their own views. Some radical local youth are only exposed to the words of radical online media and social media pages. Users prefer to follow political leaders that they support ideologically, thus increasing the effect of political polarization (Johnson, Kaye, & Lee, 2017). It is also found social media serve as an echo chamber where people are motivated to participate by perceiving a homogeneous opinion climate and forming a pro-protest attitude (Shen et al., 2020).

The information cocoon or echo chamber effects could limit the diversity of media content people are exposed to and thus have an adverse effect on the democratic discourse, open-mindedness and a healthy public sphere (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2002). Echo chambers do not only lead to partisan and ideological polarization, but they also divide the society (Justwan et al., 2018).

Ever since the Occupy movement in 2014, the people of Hong Kong have been divided into two opposing camps: the "blue ribbon", or pro-establishment faction and the "yellow ribbon", or pro-democracy faction. This Anti-extradition Bill Movement has deepened the political polarization in Hong Kong, leading to the violent and vicious attacks: verbal, cyber, and physical. Individuals from different camps are only exposed to information that reinforces their political

views. They tend to remain isolated from other individuals with opposing views, retreating into information cocoons of like-minded media sources. The danger of information cocoons is that political partisans will be able to avoid news that challenges their beliefs, thus creating a feedback loop that heightens political polarization.

From the review of the above literature, we can draw the conclusion that social media has become one of the most popular platforms for Hong Kong youth to contact and communicate with the outside world. Political unfriending on social media is not only a clear demonstration of political ideology but also a kind of political participation. It is widely believed and empirically approved that social media can be used as a powerful political tool during and even after the social movements. Information cocoon effect is often visible in a polarized society because people from different camps tend to expose themselves only to information that reinforces their existing political views, creating information cocoons of like-minded media sources, within which information is filtered and tailored to their tastes and prevailing opinions.

3. Purposes and Research Methods of This Study

This study aims: 1) To get to know Hong Kong students' political polarization on social media and the related information cocoon effect; 2) To investigate the current situation and possible effects of relationship dissolution on social media as a means of political participation in the movement; 3) To analyse the psychological impact of online relationship dissolution due to political polarization; 4) to contribute to recommending solutions and suggestions on social media relationship dissolution problems as well as ways to break free from information cocoons.

The study employed in-depth interviews as the major research method to explore the deep-seated reasons behind these phenomena. Our original goal was to interview about 100 students; 96 in-person interviews were actually conducted. Among the interviewees, 42% ($n = 41$) were male and 58% ($n = 55$) were female. 41% ($n = 39$) were middle school students and 59% ($n = 57$) were college and university students.

The interviews were conducted by the PI, Co-Is, the research assistant and sometimes student helpers. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to target some students with deep level of engagement in the movement. All the participants were assured that their confidentiality would remain secure and they would not be identified by name in any report using information obtained from this interview.

The face-to-face interview was conducted individually. Interviews ranged in length from around one hour to one hour and 30 minutes, with the majority of interviews lasting approximately one hour. Most interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed. The interview data were then interpreted and analyzed by the research assistant under the guidance of the PI and Co-Is, using thematic analysis by [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#) with modifications.

4. Research Findings of the In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews with Hong Kong students were carried out to uncover their range of views, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and experiences of the interviewees about the movement. The results of the research questions are summarized in six categories: attitudes toward and reasons of youth engagement in the movement (**Table 1** and **Table 2**), political unfriending on social media (**Tables 3-7**), impacts of political unfriending on campus and social media (**Table 8** and **Table 9**), ways to ease negative emotions of political unfriending (**Table 10**), information cocoon effects and ways to escape the cocoons (**Table 11** and **Table 12**), and political polarization in Hong Kong and its impact (**Table 13** and **Table 14**).

Table 1. General attitude toward movement.

Attitudes toward the movement	Support	oppose	Neutral
<i>Number of responses</i>	87	4	5
<i>Percentage</i>	90.6%	4.2%	5.2%

Table 2. Reasons of students' involvement.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Impact of liberal education in middle schools</i>	25
<i>Information and mobilization functions of social media</i>	22
<i>Peer pressure</i>	15
<i>For the future of Hong Kong</i>	14
<i>Government's tough stance</i>	8
<i>After-effects of the Umbrella Movement</i>	7
<i>Police violence</i>	6
<i>Information cocoon</i>	6

Table 3. Radical degree on social media.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Very radical on social media</i>	65
<i>Neutral or rational</i>	26

Table 4. Political unfriending on social media.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Hiding and/or unfollowing them</i>	42
<i>Unfriending them</i>	26
<i>Taking no action</i>	18
<i>Depending on the closeness of the relationships</i>	9

Table 5. Political unfriending as cyberbullying.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Not an act of cyberbullying</i>	46
<i>Might lead to cyberbullying</i>	25

Table 6. Experiences and impact of being unfriended.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Not unfriended so far</i>	65
<i>Unfriended by others</i>	22
<i>Little impact</i>	20
<i>Impact depending on situations</i>	6

Table 7. Real life consequences of online relationship dissolution.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Never to meet again</i>	65
<i>It just depends</i>	29

Table 8. Possible impacts of political engagement on campus.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Distrust and conflicts between students and teachers</i>	58
<i>Conflicts between students with different political positions</i>	29
<i>Pressure even among the yellow-ribbon students</i>	16

Table 9. Possible impacts of the movement on future online relationships.

Themes	Frequency
<i>More close relationship with people of the same political position</i>	43
<i>More alienated between students of different political positions</i>	22
<i>More careful about publishing online posts in the future</i>	16

Table 10. Ways to ease negative emotions out of political unfriending.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Parents should communicate with their children</i>	51
<i>Finding a friend to talk to is an effective way out</i>	42
<i>Teachers should provide timely assistance to those unfriended, especially the “minority students”</i>	20
<i>Publicity and education should be strengthened to avoid possible cyberbullying because of political unfriending</i>	17
<i>Social welfare agencies can provide personal psychological counselling</i>	9

Table 11. Existence and impacts of information cocoons.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Living in information cocoons</i>	45
<i>Not living in information cocoons</i>	32
<i>The society will be more divided</i>	76

Table 12. Ways to escape information cocoons.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Be open-minded toward different information</i>	62
<i>Cultivate media literacy to tell the truth from fake news</i>	21
<i>Establish fact-checked news websites to ensure the accuracy of the news</i>	8

Table 13. Impacts of political polarization on Hong Kong society.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Social disintegration</i>	48
<i>Hostility toward government and police</i>	15
<i>Negative impacts on the younger generation</i>	6

Table 14. Causes of political polarization in Hong Kong.

Themes	Frequency
<i>Deep-seated social problems</i>	39
<i>Incapable governance of successive Hong Kong governments</i>	31
<i>Biased and radical news media (social media) in Hong Kong</i>	27

4.1. Attitudes toward and Reasons of Their Engagement in the Movement

Q1: what is your general attitude toward the Anti-extradition Bill Movement?

As **Table 1** indicates, the interviewees' generally attitudes toward the movement are quite similar with the survey responses. A vast majority of students claimed that they supported the movement. Only quite a small number of students said they opposed or took a neutral position toward the movement.

Q2: A lot of students take an active part in this movement. In your opinion, what motivates the students' involvement?

To our surprise, the most mentioned reason for students' involvement in the movement is liberal education at middle schools. The typical response is expressed in the following citation from an interviewee:

"Liberal education is a compulsory subject in middle schools. It is this subject that teaches students to think independently and critically. After completing the liberal education subject, we begin to criticize a lot of social issues, especially

China-Hong Kong relations and issues. I believe that just because of this very reason, many students come to understand the seriousness of this Anti-extradition Bill Movement and actively participate in it.”

Information and mobilization functions of social media ranked the second reason for students’ participation in the movement. The most often used social media are WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram among Hong Kong students. As an interviewee puts:

“The students usually spend most of their time on social media, which is a good channel for us to know what is happening around us. Social media is the primary tool for us to communicate. Since the Anti-extradition Bill Movement began last May or June, there has been more and more information about the movement disseminating on the Internet. Students also make use of social media to express their voices and call on others to join them in demonstrations.”

The easy-to-understand publicity on social media is believed to be helpful for students to understand the movement. As one interviewee puts like this:

“I had little knowledge and almost no participation in politics before the movement. It is the so-called ‘News package for Dummies’ on social media that helps me get a clear grasp of current social issues in Hong Kong.”

Peer pressure is the third most mentioned reason for the students’ active involvement in the movement.

“Most of my friends are yellow ribbons. They often share posts that support the movement, blame the government and police for cracking down on the democracy in Hong Kong, and even take part in the street protests. If you just say that you support the movement but do nothing to show your action, then some people would say that you fail to contribute enough as a yellow ribbon.”

Although tough government stance only ranked as the fifth motivator for the students’ involvement, it is worth noting the interviewees’ logic in the statement:

“In the early days we used some peaceful methods. We expressed our needs by way of peaceful demonstrations, but the government’s attitude is too tough, ignoring our views and refusing the withdrawal of extradition bill. Perhaps the demonstrators’ fierce actions afterwards are the response to the Government’s tough stance. We think it is necessary to make more drastic actions to arouse the Government’s attention and their concession.”

In addition to the above reasons in **Table 2**, “for the future of Hong Kong”, “police violence”, and “information cocoons” are also regarded as the motivation factors that drive students to engage themselves in the movement.

4.2. Political Unfriending on Social Media

Q3: It is said that the movement causes a serious confrontation between the yellow ribbons and blue ribbons in Hong Kong society. Are your friends radical or rational on social media when talking about the movement? Please give an example.

Results in **Table 3** show that most of the students are radical in their rhetoric on social media. Some very radical rhetoric needs to be noticed, such as follows:

“My friends are radical. They sometimes publish some pictures of blue ribbons on Instagram and say very bad words about them. For example, they would leave comments like ‘why not kill him’ or ‘set him on fire’. Of course, the very popular radical slogan about the police is “May the whole family of black Popo die.”

It is interesting to note that blue ribbons are not so radical in their rhetorical toward yellow ribbons as compared with yellow ribbons’ rhetoric.

“Some blue ribbons are also radical because they call the demonstrators cockroaches. But it seems most blue-ribbon students are comparatively mild. Perhaps they don’t want to get into trouble, for example, they don’t want to be doxed.”

Q4: It is reported that political unfriending or unfollowing is common on social media during the movement. Will you unfriend or unfollow a friend whose political position is different from yours? Why?

As shown in **Table 4**, most interviewees would hide or/unfollow friends whose political positions are different from theirs, rather than unfriend them from the very beginning.

“So far I have not unfollowed anyone because most of my friends have the same position with me. There are only a few friends of the opposite positions. If I make more radical remarks and I don’t want my Blue ribbon friends to be unhappy, I will hide him, preventing them from seeing my posts to make them feel better.”

Some interviewees say they would unfriend those whose political views are quite different from theirs from the very beginning so as not to be irritated or angered by the others’ posts or comments.

“As the saying goes: people of different moral convictions cannot get along. If a friend has completely different political views from me, I would most likely terminate the relationship with him. Unfriending him can prevent us from seeing each other’s posts.”

Still some interviewees say that they would respect the political position of their friends and would take no action to dissolve the relationship because they think that “Everyone has his freedom of speech. A person can express any ideas and positions that he has, even if they are contrary to my ideas”.

A few interviewees say that the closeness of the relationship with the other will play an important part in their final decision of political unfriending.

“It depends on the closeness of our relationship. If we are close friends, I will directly find him and discuss our differences. If it is a distant friend, I may directly unfriend or unfollow him without communicating with him.”

Q5: Is political unfriending a cyberbullying?

When asked whether political unfriending on social media should be regarded as an act of cyberbullying, most interviewees don’t agree.

“I don’t think that unfriending means cyberbullying. It is just because men of totally different principles can never act together. We just separate from each other if we do not agree with each other. It is not a big deal at all.”

But some other interviewees agree that political unfriending might lead to some trouble or even cyberbullying.

“Some people will say bad things about you if you unfriend them. For example, they might capture a screenshot of your Instagram or Facebook intended for a public trial by the netizens.”

Q6: Have you ever been unfriended by others during this movement? How does the relationship dissolution affect you?

Table 6 clearly indicates that most interviewees report that they have not been unfriended by others because most of their friends are yellow ribbons with the same political position. Some report they were unfriended. One interviewee told the following story:

“I have a relative who strongly supports the Hong Kong and Chinese government. I write a lot of posts expressing my political opinions on my IG story and support pro-democracy party candidates. Later I found out that he unfriended me.”

When talking about the impact of being unfriended, quite a number of students say such political unfriending has very little impact on them because “one or two friends less on social media means nothing to me”. But a small number of interviewees say how big or small the impact of being unfriended depends on the relationship with the other. If unfriended by an important person or a close friend, they will feel unhappy and sad.

Q7: Will you meet people who unfriend you or whom you unfriend on social media in the future? Why?

As can be seen from **Table 7**, most interviewees say they will not meet the person who unfriend them or whom they unfriend because they might “quarrel with each other over political position, which will make nobody happy”. Some say they will never meet with the person personally but might have to meet each other in such situations as a classmate gathering or a family gathering.

4.3. Impacts of Political Unfriending on Campus and Social Media

Q8: What are the possible impacts of political unfriending on campus?

As reflected in **Table 8**, most interviewees agree that political unfriending on social media is not only a political gesture but also a kind of political participation. Such political engagement is very common on campus during the Anti-extradition Bill Movement. The possible impacts of such political engagement are reportedly manifested in the following three aspects:

Firstly, political engagement on campus might lead to distrust between teachers and students. As one student puts it:

“The relationship between teachers and students become more embarrassing as the students feel that the teachers with opposite political positions are against them. The students dare not express any opposite views and then tend not to communicate with them. Sometimes students may even insult the teachers verbally in private.”

Secondly, political engagement on campus is said to increase the conflicts between yellow-ribbon students and blue ribbon students. An example was given that a student from a police family was unfriended by his classmates just because of differences in political positions.

Thirdly, some yellow ribbons mention the pressure of political engagement even among themselves during the movement. As one puts:

“I admit that I am a yellow ribbon. This movement has made me think twice before posting information on social media. For example, I will avoid posting food and amusement posts on special days. There is a term called HK Pig. It refers to those people who are politically apathetic and who post pictures of delicious food and beautiful places most of the time. I don’t want to be called a HK Pig.”

Another interviewee told a story to show the pressure:

“We usually visit yellow stores. But one of my friends once visited a blue store by accident. She posted some pictures of the food from that store. Then she was criticized and even attacked on social media. She was so frightened and so sorry for her mistake.”

Q9: What impacts does this movement have on your future online relationships?

This movement are said to have three major impacts on the students’ future online relationships according to **Table 9**. Firstly, the movement is said to provide a good chance to make friends with the same political position. Secondly, the movement is believed to make students keep distance from those with different political positions. Thirdly, this movement is said to strengthen the political awareness of the participants. They would become more careful about online posts in order not to get into trouble.

4.4. Ways to Ease Negative Emotions of Political Unfriending

Q10: Studies show that people unfriended because of political reasons suffer negative emotions such as sadness, unhappiness, or even depression. What, in your opinion, can families, friends, teachers, and society do to ease their negative emotions?

Table 10 lists the suggested ways to ease the negative emotions of political unfriending. Quite a lot of interviewees say they have quite different political views with their parents. It seems to them that most parents are blue ribbons. The most stressful emotions result from unsuccessful family communication, as illustrated by one of the interviewees:

“Family members meet every day. The political differences hurt the feelings of both sides deeply. Parents should allow their children to different political views. They should try to understand what young people are thinking and doing. There are cases that the children are drive out by some family members due to political differences. So many times the children choose not to communicate with their parents in order not to widen the generation gaps as well as not to make each other unhappy.”

Others don't think that family members can help a lot because of less communication between young people and their parents nowadays. To them, it is friends that can play an emotional supporting role.

"I feel comfortable to be surrounded by friends with similar political views. I think friends are the most important supporters because we work and play together most of the time and understand each other much better."

It is suggested by some interviewees that teachers can pay more attention to the emotional state of their students. For example, teachers need to keep an eye on some "minority students", as illustrated by one interviewee:

"To be frank, teachers should pay more attention to the blue ribbons in this movement. In my opinion, the yellow-ribbon students are majorities, and the blue ribbons are minorities. If some blue ribbons are unfriended because of political reasons, it is very difficult for them to find peers with the same age and with the same political philosophy. They perhaps can only turn to older people for comfort and help. In this way, how can he ease his negative emotions because of the online relationship dissolution? Teachers can pay more attention to the emotional state of such 'minority students' such as children of police or blue ribbons in school. They should provide timely assistance if these students are cyberbullied."

Some interviewees suggest strengthening education on the prevention of possible cyberbullying due to political unfriending.

"I think to attack someone with radical comments on his posts or to unfriend him on social media is a kind of cyberbullying. The unfriended might fight back by doxing the other. We should let everyone know that such acts might lead to violation of laws."

It is also suggested that social welfare agencies can play a role in reducing the negative emotions due to political unfriending by providing personal psychological counselling.

4.5. Information Cocoon Effects and Ways to Escape the Cocoons

Q11: Information cocoon effect strengthens the political polarization because people retreat into information cocoons of like-minded media sources. It makes blue ribbons more blue and yellow ribbons more yellow. Do you think you live in such cocoons? What impact do you think the information cocoon effect will have on Hong Kong society in the long run?

The above table shows that a majority of interviewees agree that they live in the information cocoons. An interviewee said that:

"I feel like I'm also in the information cocoon because my Instagram only follows yellow ribbons' pages. My friends all share information about yellow ribbons. Almost no posts from blue ribbons can be seen on my social media."

But some students don't think that they live in such information cocoons because they say they read posts from both sides.

"I feel that the information I expose to is filtered according to my preferences. However, sometimes I realize that this is not good. So, I will see some of infor-

mation from the opposite side, get to know how other people think. In this way I will not confine myself to the information I am interested in.”

But when required to illustrate the impacts of such information cocoons on the Hong Kong society in the long run, a vast majority of interviewees agree with its negative effects.

“If people live in such information cocoons for a long time, people will be more reluctant to receive information from the opposite side. They will analyse events from their own single and their existing perspectives. Both sides will become more radical. There is no room for peaceful and rational discussions. It is bad for the democracy development.”

Q12: How can Hong Kong students break such information cocoons?

When interviewees were asked to suggest ways for Hong Kong students to break information cocoons, the number one suggestion, as indicated in **Table 12**, is for students to have an open mind and to be always ready to accept different information. It is also critical for students to cultivate their media literacy and information literacy so as to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to distinguish disinformation and truth, which is very important in today's post-truth era. It is believed by some interviewees that the establishment of some fact-checked news websites by some reliable organizations such as journalism schools or media organizations to ensure the accuracy of the news stories will help students as well as educate them to tell the truth from fake news.

4.6. Political Polarization in Hong Kong and Its Impact

Q13: Political polarization is sometimes presented by radical and extreme languages. In this movement, radical terms such as “cockroaches”, “black Popo”, “thugs”, “tyranny” are often heard. What are the impacts of such online radical rhetoric on Hong Kong society?

When asked to name the impacts of political polarization in terms of radical rhetoric on social media, social disintegration is the number one impact on Hong Kong society, followed by the hostile attitudes toward Hong Kong government and police and negative impacts on younger generations. In sum, political polarization is believed to have negative impacts on societal solidarity, political governance, and education system in Hong Kong.

Q14: Yellow ribbons become more yellow while blue ribbons more blue. What are the causes of political polarization in Hong Kong?

Rome was not built in one day. This saying is most mentioned when the interviewees were asked to tell the causes of political polarization in Hong Kong. As presented in **Table 14**, deep-seated social problems that have not been resolved all these years is believed the number one factor that divides the society. In the opinion of the interviewees, Hong Kong successive governments are then held accountable for the political polarization because they have failed to solve the deep-seated social problems due to their incapable governance. Hong Kong news media, including various social media, are also believed to shoulder re-

sponsibility for the polarized society because the news stories of some news media are always biased, radical, and irresponsible.

5. Conclusion

This study further confirms that Hong Kong youth participation in political activities is bolstered by social media, which has been used to share information and mobilize emotion and action. Social media is believed to be a public sphere for youth to exchange political views as well as a catalyst for youth radicalization.

Political unfriending on social media is a common phenomenon in a polarized society. Online relationship dissolution includes unfriending, unfollowing or hiding. It is widely believed and empirically approved that such online dissolution causes discomfort, distress, and even psychological harm to those being unfriended. At the same time, political unfriending on social media is not only a clear demonstration of political ideology but also a kind of political participation.

This study has revealed Hong Kong students' overall attitudes toward the movement and their online participation in the movement, investigated their practices of political unfriending, unfollowing and hiding on social media, revealed the psychological pressure and possible cyber bullying caused by such online participatory action towards political dissidents, and explored ways for schools, parents, government and other stakeholders to guide students to break their information cocoons by exposing themselves to different political ideologies in a more inclusive manner for a healthier development of democracy in Hong Kong.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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