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Examining the roles of social media use and connections to public actors on democratic engagement: An analysis of young adults in three Asian societies

Michael Chan, Francis Lee and Hsuan-Ting Chen
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Social media platforms not only provide young adults exposure to information about political and social affairs, but also opportunities to curate connections with influential public actors that can engender greater public expression and participation in civic life. We examine these dynamics using probability surveys of young adults in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Results across the three samples showed that social media connections with journalists and activists were positively related to exposure to and sharing of public affairs content. Sharing public affairs content on social media in turn was related to greater willingness to speak out about political and social issues beyond the social media platforms. These experiences further empower youth to engage in civic participation. This study elucidates the importance of public actors on social media as socialization agents for youth that can engender subsequent public expression and civic participation across societies with different political and media systems.

Keywords

Asia, civic engagement, political expression, social media, social networks

Corresponding author:
Michael Chan, School of Journalism and Communication, New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Humanities Building, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong.
Email: mcmchan@cuhk.edu.hk

The widespread use of social media around the world has fundamentally altered peoples' engagement with politics and civic life. This is especially so for young people because it is no longer just family, schools, and universities that shape their experiences with politics and society (Earl et al., 2017). The evolving media and information environment means that youths can directly learn about and act upon political and social issues through social media, which has become the primary source of news for young people around the world (Newman et al., 2019). Indeed, a meta-analysis of over a 100 survey studies showed that political uses of the Internet and social media engender greater political and civic participation among youth (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). The question then is not whether social media is conducive to greater engagement among youth, but how and under what conditions.

This study extends our understanding of youth social media use and engagement in two ways. First, we answer the call for more research to explicate the role and implications of individuals' "personal social networks" in information sharing on social media (Kümpel et al., 2015). More specifically, we use the citizen communication mediation model to examine how connections to influential public actors such as journalists, activists, scholars, and government officials can shape youths' socialization into political and civic life. In doing so, we provide a clearer picture on how youths' active curation and personalization of their social media networks can engender greater engagement in politics and society. Second, our study focuses on youths in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, three Confucian societies with similar cultural values and where the youth has embraced the use of social media for news and public affairs information in recent years. For example, while 60% and 68% of the general online population in Taiwan and Hong Kong get news from Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Line, the number rises to 76% and 81% for those aged 18–24 (Newman et al., 2020). In the case of China, the top two platforms WeChat and Weibo have 78% and 56% penetration, respectively (We are social, 2020), with the numbers for youths likely to be even higher. While culturally and technologically similar, the three societies are very different politically as they represent an authoritarian state, hybrid regime, and young liberal democracy, respectively.

A frequent narrative in much of Western research on digital media and democratic engagement among youths has been the observed declines in formal political participation in established democracies, which raised fears about the long-term consequences of youth disengagement on democratic functioning (Kim and Amnå, 2015). These discourses mostly framed the role of digital technologies in terms of how they can "stem" or "reverse" this youth participation gap (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020; Xenos et al., 2014). Asian-centric discourses instead have emphasized the "emancipatory potential" of digital technologies and the extent social media can engender greater democratization in the region's more authoritarian societies (Abbott, 2013). Indeed, recent youth-led political causes such as the Sunflower and Umbrella movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively, have demonstrated the utility and power of social media to mobilize and sustain political action (Ortmann, 2015; Rowen, 2015). Even in China with its omnipresent censorship apparatus, youths can express their opinions on some political issues if they do not directly challenge the central government and party leadership (Chen, 2017). Thus, these three societies are appropriate cases to examine social media and

participation in societies that share common cultural values yet have very different political and media systems.

Literature review

Media and democratic engagement among youth

Political scientists have long acknowledged the importance of the media as one of the foundational socializing agents for youths in their development of norms, values, and attitudes that shape their subsequent engagement in political and civic life (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995). This is especially the case in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood as the media becomes a more prominent socializing agent in relation to parents and schools. Moreover, because youths self-select and tailor their own information environments, their choices, and subsequent political attitudes and behaviors can endure for a lifetime (Ohme and de Vreese, 2020). Early research on youth use of digital media (i.e. Internet, social media) and democratic engagement tended to emphasize news exposure and political discussion as drivers of youth participation. Youths who are well informed are more interested in knowledgeable and efficacious about politics and society, which leads to greater engagement (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Delli Carpini, 2004). Digital media also provides a variety of tools for youths to express their views and opinions about politics to others, which further empowers them to participate in politics and civic affairs (Lee et al., 2012; Yamamoto et al., 2015). The development of the *communication mediation model* integrated these two insights by demonstrating that the relationship between media use and participation is indirect through discussion (Chan et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2007; Shehata and Amnå, 2019), such that using media for informational purposes (e.g. following the news) drives greater expression (e.g. discussing politics with others offline or online), which leads to greater participation.

An extension of the model is the *citizen communication mediation model* (Lee et al., 2012), which emphasized the "social-structural factors" that preceded information and expression. For youths, these include family and peer networks as well as classroom deliberations that "foster skills, capacities, and motivations necessary for engaging in the subsequent search of relevant political information and the exchange of opinions among citizens on public issues" (Lee et al., 2012: 687). In this study, we fill a gap by examining another important social-structural factor that is relevant for youths as they are heavy users of social media; influential *public actors* on social media that can engender greater expression and participation in civic life among youth.

The role of public actors in the personal social network

The defining feature of all social media platforms is the "network" and a user's personal social network on social media comprises the totality of the connections he or she has established with other users through "friending," "liking," or "following" (Kümpel et al., 2015). A typical user's news feed may feature a smorgasbord of private, public, and commercial messages by different actors. Push mechanisms determine what information is displayed, which sometimes may lead to users' incidental exposure to content on

political and social affairs (Heiss and Matthes, 2019). Users can exert some degree of control on their feeds through active curation and personalization of information sources such as "liking" other users or joining groups (Lee et al., 2019), and these preferences in turn inform the push mechanisms algorithmically as to what content they prefer to consume (Thorson et al., 2021).

In this regard, youths' proactive curation of connections with public actors on social media can have substantive consequences for their socialization to political and civic life. Like close friends, public actors such as journalists, politicians, and activists can serve as opinion leaders who are very informed or influential in a specific subject area or social domain. Of course, a connection to these actors does not equate to an actual friendship in the strictest sense. Rather, it is better described as a transactional relationship where both parties are expected to gain some benefits. For youths, these actors can be important sources of information on topics they care about. For public actors, the logic of virality motivates them to accumulate "followers" and "likes" to disseminate their messages to the widest possible audience. Past research suggests that connections with these actors can be catalysts for subsequent democratic engagement. Chan's (2016) study showed that Facebook connections to public actors predicted political participation and protest. Similarly, Chen et al. (2016) found that youths' connections to public actors predicted online opinion expression, political, and civic participation. There are several possible explanations behind these relationships. Having more connections may simply entail more exposure to public affairs information as the respective platform algorithms infer user content preferences by the links to these actors. Users also regard these public actors as more trustworthy, so users are more likely to act upon the information they receive from them (Turcotte et al., 2015). These findings suggest that this socio-structural aspect of social media use for democratic engagement can be an important antecedent of informational and expressive uses. But past studies did not distinguish what kinds of public actors were more relevant and conducive to political socialization and democratic engagement. To gain a clearer picture, we focus on four types of relevant public actors for youth political socialization: journalists, activists, scholars, and government officials.

Connections to journalists. The social media space is important for journalists because they can serve as news and opinion hubs that increase their market value and drive user traffic to their news outlets (Brems et al., 2016). Previous research has shown that friending journalists was positively related to news sharing on social media (Weeks and Holbert, 2013) and interviews of youths have highlighted the importance of links to journalists as sources of trusted news that keeps them abreast on what is happening in society (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). For authoritarian and hybrid regimes like China and Hong Kong, these connections can be especially important sources of information that is underreported or censored in the mainstream media. Some journalists in China, for example, can have over a million followers to their Weibo accounts and their commentaries can be influential to shape subsequent reactions and discussions by followers on substantive political and social issues (Su, 2019). In the case of Hong Kong, the mainstream press has been gradually co-coopted by pro-China business interests. So, youths may turn to social media for more liberal-leaning content and critical coverage of politics and society (Lee et al., 2017).

Connections to activists. Activists can leverage the network logic of different social media platforms to disseminate information, expand their supported base, and mobilize collection action (Poell and van Dijck, 2015). On Twitter and Weibo, hashtags can link diffuse networks and centralize user engagement on a single political or social cause (Boulianne et al., 2020). Facebook further allows users to join specific activist group pages. Social media thus provides youths numerous entry points to learn about different political and social causes and the communicative tools to express their solidarity, support, and participation in collective action and protest. Such was the case of Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests where predominantly young people used different social media platforms to discuss, organize, and execute a wide range of protest actions against the government (Purbrick, 2019). In China, activists need to tread a fine line as any content that instigates collective action are strictly censored (King et al., 2013). So, they often employ creative methods (e.g. use of homophones) to disseminate messages or express their views (Li et al., 2021).

Connections to government officials. Social media allow politicians to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as media organizations and journalists and connect directly to citizens to disseminate information or mobilizing messages that further their political agendas (Marquart et al., 2020). On the other side, connecting to politicians is a way for citizens to stay informed of current events and learn about policy positions that help them decide how to vote in elections (Parmelee and Roman, 2019). Marquart et al.'s (2020) study in Denmark showed that almost half of those aged 15–25 follow at least one politician on social media, and following politicians was positively related to increased civic messaging and political participation during an election. Similarly, Facebook has become an integral tool for politicians in Taiwan to reach citizens directly to influence public opinion and to mobilize them to vote in national elections (Lin, 2016). In Hong Kong and China, however, there are fewer incentives for unelected leaders to engage directly with citizens and, hence, the use of social media by politicians is less prominent.

Connections to scholars. Compared to the other public actors, less work has examined the role of scholars in youth political socialization. A possible reason is that scholars can have various motivations to use social media that are not related to politics and current affairs, such as relationship development and personal well-being (Veletsianos et al., 2019). In China, professors often use Weibo to build up their professional image and reputation (Mou, 2014). Similarly, university students may friend or follow professors for social reasons. This is not to say that there is a lack of politically active scholars in these societies. In 2014, scholars played important roles in the student-led Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. For the former, two of the three initiators of the movement were university professors (Kong, 2019), while for the latter a legal scholar was a prominent spokesperson for the movement (Rowen, 2015). In China, celebrity scholars have used social media to set discussion agendas on controversial issues such as in China's #MeToo movement (Ling and Liao, 2020). Like activists, scholars who comment on political and social issues are careful not to cross any red lines that may lead to government reprisals and sanctions.

Research questions

Based on the earlier summaries, it is apparent that how youths in these three societies engage with these public actors on social media can potentially have a lasting impact on their future participation in political and civic life. We provide an initial assessment of the potential outcomes of these connections on social media using Zukin et al.'s (2006) typology of youth engagement. First, based on the extant evidence connections to public actors on social media should lead to greater *cognitive engagement*, which include among other things attention to and discussion of political and social affairs. In this study, we focus specifically on exposure to and sharing of public affairs information on social media. Rather than state an individual hypothesis for every public actor and type of behavior, we raise the following umbrella question:

> *RQ1*. What are the relationships between connections to public actors and exposure to and sharing of public affairs information on social media?

Second, the connections may also engender *public voice*, that is, "the way citizens give expression to their views on public issues" (Zukin et al., 2006: 54) and *civic engagement*, which are activities that "aims at achieving a public good, but usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others" (p. 51). Here, we explore whether connections with public actors on social media may serve as "gateways" for youths to engage in political and civic life *beyond* the social media space (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). This leads to the following research question:

> *RQ2*. What are the relationships between connections to public actors and public voice and civic engagement?

Finally, we integrate connections to public actors with the citizen communication mediation model, which proposes an indirect pathway from social–structural factors to democratic engagement through information seeking and political expression (Lee et al., 2012). This is because connections to public actors provide the motivation and competence for youths to seek relevant political content and express their opinions, which in turn engenders political and civic participation. For example, posts from public actors can be important sources of public affairs information that promotes sharing by users to others on their personal social networks. Posts from actors can also instigate action beyond the social media space by providing mobilization information for a particular political or social issue or cause. Various iterations of the communication model have been tested among youth samples in the United States, Asia, and Europe (see Chan et al., 2017; Chen and Chan, 2017; Lee et al., 2012; Shehata and Amnå, 2019), so there is strong empirical support for the model. This leads to the final research question:

> *RQ3*. Can the relationships from connection to public actors and civic engagement be explained by the citizen communication mediation model?

Method

Sample

We distributed paper surveys between May and July 2019 to university students in four cities: Guangzhou and Shenzhen in China; Taipei, the capital of Taiwan; and Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China. Multistage stratified sampling by university, faculty, and class was adopted to attain the samples. For China, 6 of 10 universities in Guangzhou and two of four universities in Shenzhen were randomly selected. Email requests were made to the instructors to distribute the surveys in class and 11 responded affirmatively (response rate = 85%). This generated 628 completed survey responses as the class sizes in the China sample were relatively large compared to Taiwan and Hong Kong. For the Taiwan sample, four public universities and three private universities were randomly selected. Emails requests were made to instructors and 26 responded affirmatively (response rate = 19%). In total, 989 completed surveys were obtained. In Hong Kong, three of eight public universities were randomly selected. Email requests were then made to instructors to distribute the questionnaires. Thirty responded affirmatively (response rate = 32%) and 908 completed surveys were obtained. Descriptive statistics for all variables by country used in this study are summarized in the online Appendix and the questionnaires are available on request from the first author.

Independent variable

In the questionnaires, respondents were first asked to name their two most used social media platforms in their everyday lives. Then, two blocks of the same social media questions were asked. The first block related to respondents' "most used social media platform" and the second block related to their "second most used social media platform." For the China sample, the two most used platforms were WeChat (97%) and Weibo (50%). For the Taiwan sample, it was Instagram (83%) and Facebook (76%). For the Hong Kong sample, it was Instagram (87%) and Facebook (67%).

Connections to public actors. Respondents answered whether they were "friends" or "followers" or whether they "followed" the following lists of public actors on the social media platform: "journalist," "scholar," "government official," and "activist" (0 = "None," 1 = "1 or 2," 2 = "Several," and 3 = "A lot"). An index for each type of actor was created by adding the answers across both social media platforms.

Dependent variables

Exposure to and sharing public affairs content on social media. Respondents answered the frequency (1 = "Never," 2 = "Rarely," 3 = "Sometimes," and 4 = "Often") in which they received content on (1) political and (2) social affairs through friends, followers, and/or other users on social media as well as the frequency in which they posted or shared content on (1) political and (2) social affairs to friends, followers, and/or other users across their two platforms. Answers were averaged to form a scale (China $\alpha = .77$, Taiwan $\alpha = .82$, Hong Kong $\alpha = .83$).

Public voice. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) on whether they had done the following in the previous 6 months: (1) contacted politicians or government officials through the Internet, (2) contacted political or social organizations through the Internet, (3) contributed pieces on social affairs to media, (4) called-in to a radio show on current events, (5) contacted politicians or government officials through phone or mail, (6) contacted political or social organizations through phone or mail, (7) made personal comments online while sharing items on current events, and (8) left comments online on items about current events. Items were combined to create a public voice index.

Civic engagement. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) on whether they had done the following in the previous 6 months: (1) donated for charity or charity events, (2) fundraise for charity event, (3) volunteered for social organizations, and (4) joined community service. The items were combined to create a civic engagement index.

Controls

Network overlap and network homogeneity. Respondents answered the percentage of people (1 = "0–20%," 2 = "21–40%," 3 = "41–60%," 4 = "61–80%," and 5 = "81–100%") on their social media platforms that they knew personally and who shared a similar background to them.

Political interest/internal political efficacy. Respondents stated their level of agreement on their interest in political and public issues (1 = "Strongly disagree," 2 = "Disagree," 3 = "Agree," and 4 = "Strongly agree"). Similarly, they stated their level of agreement that they (1) had the knowledge to engage in political and community affairs and (2) knew about politics and government more than others. The latter two were combined to form a scale of internal political efficacy (China $r = .56$, Taiwan $r = .68$, Hong Kong $r = .70$; all $p < .001$), and reflects individuals' beliefs about their general competence to understand and participate in politics (Niemi et al., 1991).

General news exposure. For news exposure, respondents answered the frequency (1 = "Never," 2 = "Rarely," 3 = "Sometimes," and 4 = "Often") in which they consumed news from print newspapers, television, traditional news outlets online, online-only news outlets, and social media.

Demographics. Respondents were asked about their gender and age. Perceived social class served as a proxy for economic status and respondents stated their perceived class level in society (1 = "low," 2 = "middle-lower," 3 = "middle," 4 = "middle-upper," 5 = "upper").

Results

Connections to public actors

Figure 1 below summarizes the percentage of each sample that has at least one connection with four types of actors. The smallest percentage ranged from 15% of the Hong

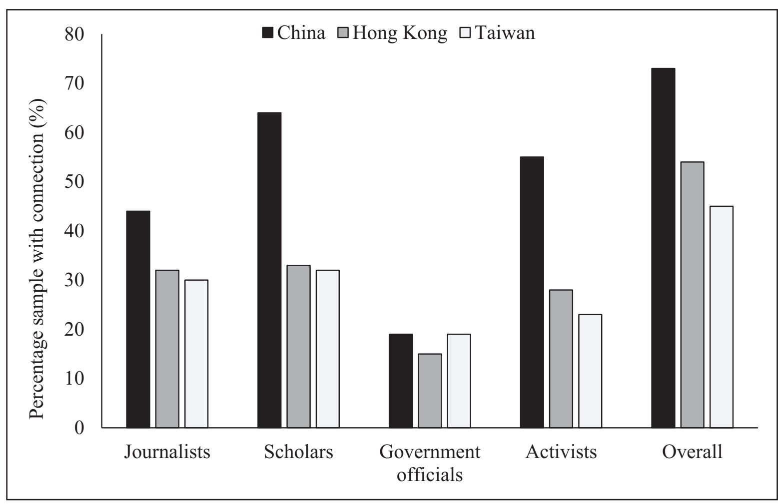

Figure 1. Percentage of users who have at least one connection to respective public actors on social media and one connection in general.

Kong sample that has at least one connection with a government official up to 64% of the China sample that has at least one connection with scholars. As a whole, 73% of the China sample was connected to at least one public actor compared to 45% for Taiwan and 54% for Hong Kong.

Connections to public actors and exposure to and sharing of public affairs content

To gain a greater understanding of the role of connection to public actors on exposure to and sharing public affairs content on social media (RQ1) we ran a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The models predicting exposure to public affairs content on social media were significant for China, $F(16, 460) = 9.13$, $p < .001$; Taiwan, $F(16, 795) = 11.54$, $p < .001$; and Hong Kong, $F(16, 761) = 8.86$, $p < .001$, are summarized in Table 1.[1]

Closer inspection of the models showed several consistent findings across the three samples. Using social media for news predicted exposure to and sharing of public affairs information and political interest and political efficacy predicted sharing of public affairs content. For connections to public actors, links to journalists predicted exposure to (China: $\beta = .08$, $p < .01$; Hong Kong: $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$; Taiwan: $\beta = .09$, $p < .05$) and sharing of public affairs content (China: $\beta = .06$, $p < .01$; Hong Kong: $\beta = .11$, $p < .01$; Taiwan: $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$) in all samples. Links to activists predicted sharing public affairs content in all three samples (China: $\beta = .04$, $p < .05$; Hong Kong: $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$; Taiwan: $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$), through it predicted exposure to public affairs content only for the China and Taiwan samples (China: $\beta = .05$, $p < .01$; Hong Kong: $\beta = .02$, $p = .51$; Taiwan: $\beta = .14$, $p < .001$). Notably, only for the Taiwan sample connections to officials predicted exposure to ($\beta < .15$, $p = .01$) and sharing of ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$) public affairs content.

Connections to public actors and public voice and civic participation

A second series of regression models were conducted to examine the role of connection to public actors on public voice and civic participation (RQ2). We used Poisson regression as the two outcomes were count variables. For public voice, the models were significant for China, $\chi^2(18)=151.91$, $p<.001$; Taiwan, $\chi^2(18)=489.88$, $p<.001$; and Hong Kong, $\chi^2(18)=524.14$, $p<.001$. Similarly, the models for civic participation were significant for China, $\chi^2(19)=60.71$, $p<.001$; Taiwan, $\chi^2(19)=127.67$, $p<.001$; and Hong Kong, $\chi^2(19)=175.67$, $p<.001$ (see Table 2). There were fewer consistent patterns of relationships across the samples on the roles of public actors. Notably, connections with activists were related to public voice ($\beta=.17$, $p<.001$) and civic engagement ($\beta=.11$, $p<.05$) for the Hong Kong sample and connections with scholars were related to public voice ($\beta=.06$, $p<.01$) and civic engagement ($\beta=.13$, $p<.05$) for the Taiwan sample. The most consistent predictor of public voice among the samples was sharing public affairs content (China: $\beta=.43$, $p<.001$; Hong Kong: $\beta=.48$, $p<.001$; Taiwan: $\beta=.31$, $p<.001$). In turn, public voice was the most consistent predictor of civic engagement (China: $\beta=.09$, $p<.001$; Hong Kong: $\beta=.18$, $p<.001$; Taiwan: $\beta=.20$, $p<.001$).

Testing a citizen communication mediation model

The pattern of relationships summarized in Tables 1 and 2 suggested possible indirect roles of connections to journalists (X_A), activists (X_B), and government officials (for Taiwan, X_C) on civic engagement (Y) through sharing public affairs content (M_1) and public voice (M_2), consistent with the citizen communication mediation model. Because of the two count outcomes, the analysis was performed using *Mplus* 7 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2011) with Monte Carlo integration. Two models were tested for each sample ($X_A \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$ and $X_B \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$) and one model for the Taiwan sample ($X_C \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$). The results are summarized in Table 3 and showed that the direct paths (except for links to journalists and activists in the Hong Kong sample) and indirect paths through sharing public affairs content did not predict civic participation. However, the indirect paths through sharing (M_1) then public voice (M_2) were significant for all models, with the exception for links to activists in the China sample where the pathway was significant only through public voice.

Discussion

After their meta-analysis of young people's digital media use and democratic engagement, Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) concluded that "digital media have a generally positive role to play in civic life, although much depends on how young people use digital tools" (p. 123). Indeed, social media has become an integral socializing agent for youths by affording direct and sometimes even visceral experiences that can shape their values and attitudes toward politics and society that can remain with them for the rest of their lives (Earl et al., 2017). This study fills an important gap by demonstrating that *who* one connects to can have substantive implications for subsequent democratic engagement. Analyses based on the citizen communication mediation model further demonstrated the

Table 1. Linear regression models predicting public affairs exposure and sharing on social media.

	Exposure to public affairs content on social media			Share public affairs content on social media		
	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan
	β	β	β	β	β	β
Controls						
Gender	.257***	.158**	–.018	.069	.027	.051
Age	.047	.023	.041**	.046	.002	.040**
Class	.021	.012	.048	–.017	–.015	–.047
Political interest	.058	.033	.036	.145**	.246***	.247***
Internal political efficacy	.049	.030	.025	.133*	.128**	.118*
Print news	.110*	.044	.064	.115*	.115**	.005
TV news	.075	–.018	–.049	.059	–.043	–.025
News website (trad.)	.049	.056	–.002	.043	.057*	.052
News website (online)	.036	.025	.069*	.036	–.011	.019
Social media						
Social media news	.126**	.192***	.118**	.092*	.133***	.058
Network overlap	–.030	.056*	.052*	–.078**	–.022	–.018
Network homogeneity	–.071	–.078*	.002	–.065	–.038	–.002
Links to journalists	.079**	.131***	.087*	.063**	.108**	.120***
Links to activists	.050**	.024	.144***	.039*	.131***	.132***
Links to officials	.019	.074	.146**	.055	.099	.144**
Links to scholars	.015	.034	.029	.016	.011	.042
R^2	.241	.157	.188	.265	.324	.347
N	477	778	812	501	790	829

Betas (β) are unstandardized coefficients.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

social-structural role of public actors to engender information seeking (e.g. consuming public affairs content), expression (e.g. sharing/discussion), and engagement.

Overall, the descriptive findings showed that connections to public actors on social media were prominent among the youth in the samples. In the Taiwan sample, 45% had at least one connection while the figures for Hong Kong and China were 54 and 73%, respectively. Curating these connections requires a little effort and allows youths to personalize what content appears in their social media feeds. It is understandable that connections to journalists and activists were related to increased public affairs content exposure and sharing because the very nature of their roles means that their posts are more likely than not to feature content about political and social issues. Moreover, such posts are likely to be packaged and presented in ways to maximize their virality and audience reach (Poell and van Dijck, 2015). The same explanation can be applied to links to government officials, but political system might explain why it only applied to the Taiwan sample. As a liberal democracy where political parties are elected by citizens,

Table 2. Poisson regression models predicting public voice and civic engagement.

	Public voice			Civic engagement		
	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan
	β	β	β	β	β	β
Controls						
Gender	–.059	.005	–.205**	.242***	.356***	.240*
Age	–.015	.013	–.006	–.032	–.021	.024
Class	.078	–.032	.005	–.083*	–.022	.015
Political interest	–.062	.198**	.086***	.053	.073	–.138
Internal political efficacy	.156	.222***	.036	.010	–.003	.230
Print news	–.095	.015	–.020	.101	.082	.113
TV news	.063	–.076	.004	.011	.025	.022
News website (trad.)	.072	.020	–.002	.039	.002	–.086
News website (online)	.036	.018	.005	.053	.081	.022
Social media						
Social media news	.144*	–.041	.033	–.049	–.139**	.016
Network overlap	.055	–.050	–.018	.002	.028	.004
Network homogeneity	.093	.045	.015	.008	–.047	–.046
Links to journalists	.062	–.031	.014	–.015	.131*	–.031
Links to activists	–.007	.169***	.073**	.013	.112*	–.046
Links to officials	.120	.218***	–.016	–.037	.020	–.124
Links to scholars	.050	.023	.061**	.015	.010	.134*
Expose content	.069	.045	–.005	–.000	.073	.059
Share content	.427***	.479***	.312***	.095	–.114*	.122
Public voice				.090***	.179***	.198***
NR^2	.241	.512	.403	.125	.212	.165
N	471	769	802	471	769	800

Betas (β) shown are unstandardized coefficients. *NR*^{2} represents Nagelkerke R-squared.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

there are pragmatic incentives for politicians in Taiwan to cultivate and maintain connections with young voters and disseminate relevant posts on social media that furthers their agendas. In China and Hong Kong, however, youths tend to be ambivalent and distrustful of unelected government officials and politicians (Li and Chan, 2016) so their posts (if any) may resonate less.

Focusing on public voice and civic engagement, which entail behaviors outside of the social media space, the findings were unequivocal in showing that sharing public affairs content on social media engenders public voice, which in turn predicted civic participation. The findings lend support for the "expression effects" explanation on engagement (Cho et al., 2018; Pingree, 2007; Shah, 2016) and the notion that certain mental processes are activated in the process of sharing that are conducive to subsequent public expression and participation. Sharing a post on political and social issues entails a range

Table 3. Citizen communication mediation models predicting youth civic participation.

	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan
	β	β	β
Links to journalists			
→Civic participation	–.009	.100**	–.025
→Share → civic participation	.003	–.006	.007
→Voice → civic participation	.003*	.011***	.004
→Share → voice → civic participation	.001*	.005***	.008***
Links to activists			
→Civic participation	.016	.112*	–.044
→Share → civic participation	.003	–.004	.006
→Voice → civic participation	.006*	.006	.000
→Share → voice → civic participation	.001	.004***	.007***
Links to government officials			
→Civic participation	–	–	–.121
→Share → civic participation	–	–	.004
→Voice → civic participation	–	–	.002
→Share → voice → civic participation	–	–	.005**
N	471	769	800

Betas are unstandardized coefficients. The same covariates as in Table 2 were entered into the mediation models but are not shown here.
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

of considerations on message composition such as whether to add one's own commentary or whether to endorse or refute the post. One may even do additional research and information searching to help with composing the message (composition effect). And then there is the consideration of how the shared message will be perceived by others (perceived reception effects), which is especially pertinent in the social media space because the act of sharing and how the message is composed is publicly observable by everyone in one's social media network. Collectively, these expression effects should equate to more cognitive engagement, which then engenders the competencies for political and civic engagement (Lee et al., 2012). This is supported by subsequent findings based on the citizen communication mediation model that consistently showed an indirect pathway along links to public actors → share public affairs information → public voice → participation in all but one sample whereas the links to public actors → share public affairs information → participation pathway was insignificant. This suggests that additional cognitive engagement is necessary to bridge the gap between sharing on social media and offline participation.

Connections with activists were related to public voice in the Hong Kong and Taiwan samples, which can be attributed to rise of youth activism in recent years. In Taiwan, these include various protests against government policies (Ho, 2020), while in Hong Kong, youths have been instrumental in the rise of "localist" political parties that seek greater political and cultural autonomy from China (Fung and Chan, 2017). Because they

are often driven by the goals of political and social change, it is likely that social media posts by these activists emphasize more on calls to action and mobilization, which spurs further public expression and participation. In Taiwan, it is noticeable that links to scholars was related to both public voice and civic participation, which may speak to the influence of educators in Taiwan and their recent history of activism against government policies (Hung, 2017). Youths in the Chinese sample generally had the most links to public actors on social media. This is perhaps indicative of strong government control of the news information environment so following public actors is considered a "safe" option to get information, opinion, and analysis on political and social issues from alternative sources. However, following such actors may not necessarily lead to greater public voice and civic participation due to the more repressive political environment. Nevertheless, findings based on the citizen communication mediation model provides robust evidence for an indirect pathway from connections with certain public actors to civic engagement, which is suggestive of a generalizable relationship that is invariant across different political systems even though all the societies share a common Confucian heritage and set of social values. This finding is in line with past studies that suggest that other factors beyond Confucianism are responsible for media use patterns in Asia (Danowski and Park, 2020).

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study and avenues for further research. First, while our findings are consistent with the citizen communication mediation model, the analyses were based on cross-sectional data. Testing of the proposed sequence of relationships requires longitudinal designs (e.g. Shehata and Amnå, 2019) and consideration of other possible mediators (Chan et al., 2020). Moreover, while some links to public actors (i.e. links to journalists) can occur at the social-structural level of the communication mediation model, it is also possible that the same or other links can be outcomes of expression (i.e. following an activist). Second, while the emphasis on the two most used social media platforms means that our measures better reflected users' overall social media news habits, this also meant that we were unable to take into account the features and affordances of specific platforms (Kümpel et al., 2015). For example, messaging apps like WeChat, Line, and WhatsApp, each have their own distinctive features as well as being collectively different to social network sites like Facebook and Instagram. Thus, future research may examine the specific technical features that are more conducive to information exposure and sharing on social media. Third, while we adopted probability samples of university students, it should be noted that they are not by any means representative of all young people in these three societies. Fourth, the types of public actors in this study are not by any means exhaustive. The literature on celebrity politics, for example, point to other types of public actors such as entertainers that may also be sources of information and catalysts for action (Loader et al., 2016). Fifth, due to our abstract measures of the four public actors, we cannot distinguish their nuances and differences across the three societies, such as political orientation (i.e. whether the actors were pro or anti-government) and scope of their activities. For example, activists in China cannot advocate for political and social change to the same extent as those in Hong Kong and Taiwan can. Yet, it is noticeable that students in China have more links to activists than those in Hong Kong and Taiwan. A feasible explanation is that in China's highly censored media and communications environment,

activists are important channels for receiving information on contentious social issues whereas students in Taiwan and Hong Kong have information channels beyond the social media space. Future research can disentangle these nuances and differences between the three societies. And finally, while this study showed that certain social media connections were conducive for civic participation, future work should also examine what motivates individuals to seek out and maintain such connections in the first place.[2]

Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the socio-structural dynamics in youths' personal social networks on social media that can engender various kinds of participatory actions in different societies as part of the political socialization process.

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ORCID iDs

Michael Chan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9911-593X
Francis Lee https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1587-4950
Hsuan-Ting Chen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3140-5169

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We included "Don't know" options for our survey questions and used listwise deletion, which resulted in the reduction of *N* in our analyses across the three samples. We inspected the missing data using the R package *naniar* and found the missing data to be fairly distributed across variables and respondents. We re-ran all regression analyses under different scenarios (i.e. removed certain control variables. imputed mean values, etc.) and the results were not substantively different with the current findings.
2. One possibility is the role of political interest which our ad hoc analyses showed was significantly related to all connection behaviors across the samples.

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Author biographies

Michael Chan is an Associate Professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research focuses on individuals' uses of digital technologies and subsequent political, social, and psychological outcomes.

Francis Lee is Professor and Director of the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has published widely on journalism, public opinion, political communication, and media and social movements.

Hsuan-Ting Chen is an Associate Professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include new media technologies, media effects, and media psychology.