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I Shield Myself From Thee: Selective Avoidance on Social Media During Political Protests

QINFENG ZHU, MARKO SKORIC, and FEI SHEN

This study examines the phenomenon of politically motivated selective avoidance on Facebook in the context of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement protests in 2014. We conceptualize selective avoidance as individual choices that users make to shield themselves from undesirable dissonant views by removing unwanted information and breaking social ties that transmit such information. Given the political turmoil and high level of polarization during the protests, we argue that selective avoidance was related to the socio-psychological factor of perceived out-group threat. We present an analysis of a survey of 769 students from Hong Kong conducted at the height of the street protests. We find that 15.6% of the respondents removed content and/or unfriended a Facebook friend during the protests. The use of Facebook for protest-related information and expression was associated with higher likelihood of selective avoidance, which in turn predicted actual participation in the street protests. The level of perceived out-group threat strengthened the positive relationship between Facebook use and selective avoidance. We thus argue that group conflict in a time of political turmoil may catalyze selective avoidance, transforming a heterogeneous socio-informational environment into a more insulated gated community. Such acts may promote protest participation but also lead to a more fragmented and polarized citizenry.

Keywords Facebook, Hong Kong, selective avoidance, social media, Umbrella Movement

Today's social media environment is characterized by context collapse and expansion of weak ties that often cut across social and political cleavages (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). What comes with the change of our online milieus is an increased likelihood of exposure to heterogeneous views and political disagreements (Kim, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2014). Still, people tend to prefer opinion-reinforcing messages over opinion-challenging ones (Garrett, 2009a; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009, 2011). Social media can reinforce this tendency by allowing personalized content curation via actions such as hiding posts, unfollowing, unfriending, and blocking other users. Furthermore, such behaviors provide input for social media algorithms that sort and filter content automatically (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). A more nuanced and contextualized view is therefore required in order to understand specific political implications of social media use. While cross-cutting

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exposure is expected to be beneficial for political tolerance and deliberation (Mutz, 2002a; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), the increased filtering capacity of digital media can result in echo chambers and a fragmented citizenry (Sunstein, 2001). Nevertheless, viewpoint consistency provided by a homogeneous group can propel people to take actions in high-risk activities such as political protests (Centola & Macy, 2007).

This study thus intends to examine human behaviors aimed at limiting exposure to politically dissenting views on social media through the removal of content (hiding content) and/or dissolution of social ties (unfriending)—two modes of non-algorithmic, manual configuration of one's immediate socio-informational environment. We conceptualize the two behaviors under the term *selective avoidance*, which refers to shielding oneself from dissonant views by screening out unwanted information and breaking social ties that transmit such information. It is a concept related to selective exposure, a habitual media exposure pattern favoring attitude-consonant information, which is found across different types of media (Stroud, 2008). Selective avoidance afforded by social media mechanisms can result in an increased exposure to consonant views, as research shows that heterophilous and weak ties are most susceptible to dissolution on Facebook (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Yet selective avoidance is different from the common practice of selective exposure, which does not necessarily sacrifice exposure to counter-attitudinal information (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013); in fact, consonant exposure has been found to be accompanied by cross-cutting exposure in the context of online news outlets (Garrett et al., 2013). In contrast, selective avoidance on social media is about actively and purposefully eliminating both present and future exposure to unwanted dissonance by cutting off connections with sources of dissenting views, something akin to creating an online gated community in which one would be shielded from the heterogeneous outside world. Using this conceptualization, we examine the relationship between social media use and politically motivated selective avoidance, as well as its impact on political participation.

We study the phenomenon of selective avoidance on Facebook in the context of a political crisis, namely, the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (or Occupy Central) protests in 2014. The protests lasted three months and were characterized by heightened tensions between the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps and deepening social divisions. As such a context may make people less willing to hear from the other side than in a different situation, we point out that this study is calibrated more to a contentious political context than to a non-contentious one. Furthermore, the intensified polarization during the movement provides us with an opportunity to look into the socio-psychological underpinnings of selective avoidance, specifically perception of out-group threat.

Social Media Use and Selective Avoidance

According to the Pew Research Center, about 18% of social network site users report to have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone for political reasons, among which 9% did so because they disagreed with others' posts about politics (Rainie & Smith, 2012). During times of political turmoil, political disagreement often becomes emotionally charged and visible on social media platforms, reflecting the contention between different sides of a debate in the real world. John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) report that during the Israel-Gaza armed conflict in 2014, 16% of Jewish Israeli Facebook users engaged in politically motivated unfriending or unfollowing. Ideologically extreme or politically engaged people are more likely to unfriend or unfollow others (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric, 2015) and hide others' posts or comments (Skoric, 2015). Weak ties that carry

heterogeneous information and perspectives are the primary target of unfriending and unfollowing (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Rainie & Smith, 2012; Sibona, 2014). Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) find that about 95% of people's Facebook connections are casual friends, which could be categorized as weak ties.

During the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, the social media discourse was likely to represent competing voices as the public opinion remained highly polarized; according to a public opinion poll conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong between October 8 and 15, 2014, 38% of the population supported the Occupy movement whereas 35% did not (So, 2014). Chances of encountering cross-cutting positions on social media were heightened because both the pro-Occupy and anti-Occupy camps used the platforms in a bid to attract audiences and win over their hearts and minds (Lee, 2014). In such a politically competitive and conflicting environment, selective avoidance is likely to occur. Existing literature on selective exposure shows that, across different types of media, people tend to prefer opinion-reinforcing information over attitudinal-challenging information (Garrett, 2009a; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009, 2011; Stroud, 2008). On social media people can easily shield themselves from attitudinal-challenging information by simply clicking a button. Bakshy and colleagues (2015) suggest that a homogeneous social-informational environment is more a result of individual choices than algorithmic filtering. We thus propose the hypothesis as follows:

H1: Protest-related Facebook use is positively associated with selective avoidance.

Selective Avoidance and Out-Group Threat

The process of selective avoidance in which an individual insulates himself or herself from attitudinally dissimilar others is often characterized by a certain level of political intolerance. Political tolerance assumes the willingness to extend civil liberties (expression of political ideas and participation in public life) to the groups one opposes or dislikes (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). Although not actively silencing those holding diverging views, a person can restrict the influence of their opinions by cutting them off from his or her ego network. This may be especially relevant when a person acts as a broker of otherwise disconnected groups, exerting great control of the information flow between them (Burt, 1997). Moreover, polarization in public opinion constitutes a political climate that activates intolerance (Stenner, 2005). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) argue that political polarization is more grounded in group-based affect (i.e., positive sentiment for one's own group and negative sentiment toward those identifying with out-groups) than policy preferences or issue positions. In a society with a distinct in-group and out-group division, decisions regarding selective avoidance are likely to be made under the influence of such a political climate and target those from the out-groups.

People who experience their beliefs with emotional intensity tend to be more defensive and have a lower level of tolerance towards other with divergent opinions (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). John and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2015) findings confirm that people with ideological zeal tend to unfriend and unfollow others on Facebook whose views they do not agree with. Political intolerance is also a product of the changing conditions of factual and perceived societal threats. For example, media framing of the nature and activities of an unpopular group that emphasizes its threat to public order and civic harmony significantly reduces citizens' level of tolerance toward the group (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). A meta-analytic study of group

conflicts shows that perceived threat arising from competition of scarce resources, conflicts of values, and deterioration of physical and economic well-being of the in-group are associated with the rising hostility toward out-groups and in-group identification (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006).

If we are correct in assuming that selective avoidance is an action indicative of intolerance, perceptions of a threat may act as a catalyst promoting selective avoidance. Specifically, people with high-level threat sensitivity are more likely to see attitude-incongruent information as a challenge or even threat to their preexisting positions than the others. It is also contextual; during times of political turmoil when emotional intensity runs high and perceived societal threat prevails, people may believe their opinions to be objectively grounded and righteous and see different voices as illegitimate and offensive. Such perception may further trigger selective avoidance as a way of self-defense.

When group conflict heightens, competition from the out-group may become a major source of perceived threat. One of the consequences of the Umbrella Movement protests was the deepening of divisions between the pro-democracy supporters and the pro-establishment supporters. The former identified themselves as Hongkongers with a culture and identity distinct from the mainland Chinese, whereas the latter group was often perceived to have intricate and closer relations with the mainland. The group relation between local Hongkongers and mainland Chinese has also become the most contested central issue between the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps (Hayoun, 2014). Political contention reached a point where "you are either for Hong Kong or you were a 'locust' lover"—referring to the perceived invasion of Hong Kong by people from mainland China (Lo, 2015).

Accordingly, we focus on perceived out-group threat as a moderator in the relationship between social media use and selective avoidance, and propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Perceived out-group threat strengthens the positive relationship between protest-related Facebook use and selective avoidance.

Social Media Use for Protest

In the past few decades, the decline of voter turnout and participation in campaign activities has been paralleled by the rise of the non-institutionalized forms of political action such as joining public interest groups, petitioning, protesting, and engaging in acts of political consumerism (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2002). Dalton (2008) argues that the change in political participation methods is a result of the altered distribution of citizenship norms; while the former is associated with the conventional duty-based citizenship, the latter comes with the emerging citizenship norms that emphasize self-expression, elite challenging actions, and direct engagement. Social movements typically take form of non-institutional, contentious, and collective political performances through which underrepresented groups challenge the status quo and fight for change by making collective claims or taking direct action. For a series of mass protests to evolve into a social movement, collective identities need to develop and participants need to share a certain sense of common purpose and commitment to a cause. A social movement also relies on informal networks through which individual and organized actors coordinate specific initiatives, engage in concerted conducts, and exchange resources in pursuit of their common goals (Tilly, 2004).

In the past 10 years, numerous studies have looked into the implications of social media use for political participation, ranging from electoral participation to contentious action. A recent meta-analytic study concludes that social media use is positively associated with political participation in general; although the average effect size is small, specific types of social media use, including informational and expressive, are robust predictors of political participation (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2015). When it comes to mass protests and social movements, studies have shown that using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs is a significant predictor of real-world protest participation in various countries, such as the United States, Chile, Egypt, and Singapore (Castells, 2012; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012).

Social media can be a vital tool for the creation of two essential elements of social movements, namely, the formation of informal networks and collective identities. A strand of research has looked into the network mechanisms of social media to explain how they facilitate the formation and functioning of the informal networks, allowing organizers and protesters to share participation information, coordinate activities in real time, and mobilize supporters. For example, the decentralized network structure enhances information cascades and provides a multitude of social reinforcements (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011). Social media use helps mobilize others by activating weak ties and brokering connections between previously disconnected networks (González-Bailón & Wang, 2013; Lim, 2012). It also publicizes and amplifies shared grievances (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Howard & Parks, 2012; Lim, 2012), and propagates public attention into a key resource for social movements (Tufekci, 2013).

Furthermore, some argue that social media use, particularly expressive use, can help form one's political self and promote commitment to the political cause, which increases the likelihood of participation (Gil De Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013; Gil De Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Rojas & Puig-I-Abril, 2009). Others argue that social media use lessens the dependence of social movements on collective identities. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that the widespread use of social media changes the logic of collective action and enables *connective action*; political expression through sharing personalized ideas, action, and resources within one's trusted social network makes participation more inclusive and self-motivating, and less dependent on significant organization and mobilization resources and the formation of a collective identity.

During the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were heavily used by the protest leaders to provide information, mobilize attention and support, and connect participants. For example, the Occupy Central With Love and Peace, the key organizer of the pro-democracy protests, had nearly 100,000 fans on Facebook (Lee, 2014). We thus propose the hypothesis as follows:

H3: Protest-related Facebook use is positively associated with actual participation in street protests.

The level of perceived out-group threat, as an indicator of in-group consciousness, may help translate social media use into real-world political participation. With a stronger perception of competition from the out-group for resources and values, in-group members tend to develop stronger awareness of their threatened status. Besides, if the expectation of participation is prevailing within the group, strong in-group identification may come with a great pressure and motivation to conform. Such group awareness is a necessary psychological condition for participation (Olsen, 1970; Verba & Nie, 1972). We thus develop the following hypothesis:

H4: The relationship between protest-related Facebook use and actual participation in street protests is strengthened by the perceived out-group threat.

Selective Avoidance and Political Participation

Given that selective avoidance afforded by social media mechanisms is a relatively new phenomenon, little is known about its implications for political participation. We thus develop our hypothesis based on the existing literature on the related concept of cross-cutting exposure and participation. Although normatively political diversity is expected to benefit democratic functioning, empirically that may not always be true, as the extant research has yielded mixed findings. Some studies have shown that cross-cutting exposure hinders voting and campaign participation (e.g., working to support a candidate; (Mutz, 2002b; Pattie & Johnston, 2009). Mutz (2002b) argued that exposure to opinion-challenging information could make people uncertain about their own positions, and that disagreement in one's social network could induce anxiety because it threatened social relationships and harmony. Other studies, in contrast, show evidence that cross-cutting exposure enhances the likelihood of participation. For example, Pattie and Johnston (2009) found that exposure to cross-cutting views was beneficial for campaign participation (e.g., donating money to a political party, working for a party or candidate), as well as future involvement in political activism (e.g., taking part in protests and boycotting) and voluntary activities.

Some scholars have attributed the mixed findings to the inconsistent operational definitions of cross-cutting exposure. Nir (2005) argued that the relationship would differ between individual-level attitudinal ambivalence (i.e., a person's internal view inconsistency toward a candidate, a party, or a political issue) and network ambivalence (i.e., exposure to political disagreement in one's social network). She found that people holding internally conflicting views took a longer time to decide whom to vote for and were less likely to take part in campaign activities than those who were non-ambivalent attitudinally, and yet perceived network ambivalence was neither detrimental nor beneficial to participation. In a similar vein, Eveland and Hively (2009) suggested that the previous studies had often lumped together the concept of interpersonal difference (i.e., the difference between one's political view with the others') and the concept of discussion network diversity (i.e., the diversity of political views within one's social network regardless of his or her own opinion), which is similar to Nir's (2005) definition of network ambivalence. They found that discussing politics with people holding disagreeing views had no relationship with voting or campaign participation when controlling for political discussion with similar others, whereas exposure to a diverse discussion network repressed participation.

Overall, when cross-cutting exposure is conceptualized as exposure to diverse views or perspectives present in one's social network, it either has a negative or null relationship with political participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Nir, 2005). Selective avoidance that reduces one's network diversity may thus have an opposite effect. Moreover, selective avoidance can create a supportive, homophilous network and promote interaction with like-minded others, both of which are associated with an increased likelihood of voting and participation in campaign activities (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Nir, 2011). Besides, residing in a homogeneous discussion network may reduce one's internal political ambivalence and thus help people make up their minds more easily and hold a stronger political conviction than in a heterogeneous network.

Existing literature on cross-cutting exposure has primarily focused on the conventional institutionalized forms of political action such as voting and activities in electoral campaigns. Relatively little is known about its implications in participation in non-institutionalized, contentious political activities, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Pattie & Johnston, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2011). Pattie and Johnston (2009) found that people who engaged in political discussion with disagreeing others were more willing to participate in public and confrontational political activities such as rallying or protesting in the future than those who did not engage in cross-cutting interaction. Wojcieszak (2011) further demonstrated that this positive relationship only existed among people with opinion extremity; people holding strong convictions are likely to be propelled to take action by the hostile surroundings because they experience the motivating anger or injustice and sense the urgency to protect the cause that they believe in. People who engage in politically motivated selective avoidance on social media also tend to be ideologically zealous (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Besides, as an action to silence the competing positions upon perceiving threat from the other side, selective avoidance can be seen as an attempt to defend one's conviction. We thus argue that people who engage in selective avoidance may also be eager to join street protests in order to defend their convictions.

Moreover, compared with the institutionalized forms of political participation, the threshold for participation in contentious political activities is often higher as it requires a stronger political self and involves greater risks. Exposure to attitude-consistent information can bolster one's political self, whereas exposure to counter-attitudinal information weakens it (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). Besides, because of the associated risks, the adoption of protest behaviors follows the logic of complex contagion. That is, it requires multiple sources of view conformity and social reinforcement. A homogeneous and interconnected social network composed of strong ties can thus function better in facilitating the diffusion of protest behaviors than a heterogeneous and loosely connected network composed of weak ties (Centola & Macy, 2007). Selective avoidance afforded by social media mechanisms, through creating a network of like-minded others, can thus help people make up their minds to join the protest. In addition, having a group of people who agree with one another can reduce within-group conflicts and increase trust, which facilitates collaboration in protests.

To summarize, selective avoidance may facilitate political participation in general through eliminating network ambivalence and promoting interaction with like-minded others. It may be particularly beneficial to public and contentious political activities such as protesting and demonstrating because selective avoidance can enhance political self and provide social reinforcement. The positive relationship can also be explained by the characteristic of people who engage in selective avoidance (i.e., the combination of emotional involvement and political conviction). We thus propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Selective avoidance on Facebook is positively associated with participation in street protests.

On this basis, we further propose a conditional process model presented in Figure 1. We propose a conditional direct effect and a conditional indirect effect. Specifically, protest-related Facebook use predicts actual participation in street protests indirectly through selective avoidance, and that the indirect effect is conditional on individuals'

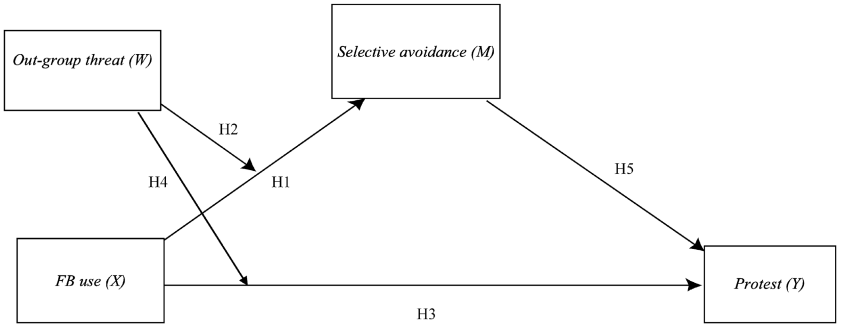

Figure 1. A conceptual diagram of the conditional process model.

perceived out-group threat. The direct relationship between Facebook use and participation is also contingent on perceived out-group threat.

Context: The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

Following John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015), this study also examines selective avoidance during times of political contention and conflict. Since the democratization process began in the 1980s, Hong Kong has grown into a politicized society wherein the public is actively engaged in various political issues through vocal expressions, demonstrations, protests, and petitions, although it lacks formal democratic institutions (Lee, 2002). The Umbrella Movement is a loosely organized pro-democracy movement petitioning for free and fair universal suffrage in Hong Kong. In August 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) of People's Republic of China (PRC) announced its decision on the proposed reform of Hong Kong's electoral system, mandating that candidates for the Chief Executive elections must be vetted by a pro-Beijing nominating committee. Incensed by the NPCSC's ruling, pro-democracy protesters engaged in a civil disobedience campaign, demanding Beijing to back down from its plan and asking for the resignation of the Chief Executive CY Leung. They clashed with police and encountered protests and petitions organized by the anti-Occupy groups showing support to the central government and demanding the restoration of law and order.

During the three months of protests, Hong Kong saw a deepened fracture between the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps and an increasing polarization of public opinion, intensifying the existing contestation within the Hong Kong system and its relationship with the Chinese central power. As Hong Kong tops the league in the world income inequality and crony capitalism indexes (*The Economist*, 2014; Wong, 2015), class struggle rises between the super wealthy who have close ties to the local and central governments and the group that comprises the poor and the lower-middle class who see little hope in upward mobility and the middle-class who live in fear of social declassment (Yip, 2014). Moreover, the contestation is not over specific gains or losses nor about specific public issues, but over territorial oppositions (national control versus local resistance) and ideologies (democratic rights versus pragmatism, such as economic prosperity and social stability). Since the hand-over, Beijing's increasing interference in the local institutions has been corroding Hong Kong's democratic character, provoking public outrage and resistance (Harold, 2014). The pro-democracy supporters'

grievances and distrust toward the governments are worsened by the mainland-friendly immigration policy backed up by the pro-establishment, as the influx of mainland immigrants allegedly threatens the locals' economic well-being, culture, and identity (Harold, 2014). In addition, as evidence emerged suggesting the Chinese authorities were spying on the democracy activists both online and offline, fear mounted that there could be real and immediate consequences of their protest actions (Sataline, 2014). Distrust toward disagreeing others deepened consequently and risks associated with protest participation heightened.

To summarize, the contestation reflected and intensified in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement—economic grievances exacerbated by political disenfranchisement made the division more ideology than issue-focused. Against such a background, the case selected in this study represents an emotionally charged, identity-based political conflict in a polarized society, which made the division harder to reconcile.

Method

Data

The data for this study came from a survey of Hong Kong students from eight public universities conducted from October 20 to November 3, 2014, at the height of the Umbrella Movement. This study adopted student surveys for two reasons. First, university students were the main force of the movement. The primary organizational forces of the movement were student- and university-related organizations: Scholarism, Hong Kong Federation of Students, and Occupy Central with Love and Peace. Second, university students are at the forefront of social media technology adoption (Ellison et al., 2007) and Facebook is a popular social media platform in Hong Kong. According to a recent social media usage report by Go-Globe, the estimated number of Facebook users in Hong Kong is 4.4 million, more than 50% of its population.[1]

To ensure higher levels of population representativeness, the number of questionnaires to be disseminated at each campus was proportional to the size student population in each institution: University of Hong Kong (140), Chinese University of Hong Kong (150), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (80), City University of Hong Kong (110), Hong Kong Polytechnic University (170), Hong Kong Baptist University (60), Lingnan University (20), and Hong Kong Institute of Education (50). Five student helpers were recruited and trained to collect the data. Student helpers were instructed to strictly follow a set of procedures for data collection: (a) only disseminate the questionnaires at student canteens during dining hours; (b) use a systematic sampling method within canteen areas (e.g., approach a student at every other seat), (c) emphasize that the survey is anonymous; (d) exclude staff and faculty members; and (e) make a record of cases that refused to participate. The response rate for the study was 86.8%. After discarding unqualified cases, 769 responses were retained for analysis.

Measures

Protest-Related Facebook Use. To measure protest-related Facebook use, respondents were asked to report how frequently they had engaged in a series of activities on Facebook since the movement started in Hong Kong on a 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = frequently). The activities included receiving and posting information about the protests; sharing friends' and/or news agencies' Facebook posts related to the protest;

and commenting, expressing views, and engaging in debates with others on the protest-related issues. The scale was created by taking the mean of the seven items (M = 2.75, SD = .99, Cronbach's α = .90).

Selective Avoidance. Selective avoidance was operationalized with two binary measures—unfriending and hiding content. The respondents were asked if they had hidden someone's comments or posts on Facebook because they did not agree with their views on the protest-related issues (0 = no, 1 = yes), and if they had unfriended someone on Facebook because they did not agree with his or her view on the protest-related issues since the protests started (0 = no, 1 = yes), respectively.

Perceived Out-Group Threat. This measurement tapped into perception of threat from mainland-Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong and in-group identification. Respondents were asked about their degree of agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree):

1. "Immigrants from mainland China contribute to Hong Kong's economy."
2. "Immigrants from mainland China pose a threat to the average Hongkongers' financial well-being."
3. "Immigrants from mainland China are not a threat to the Hong Kong identity."
4. "Immigrants from mainland China make Hong Kong a less civilized place because of their bad manners."

In addition, respondents were asked to identify themselves along the spectrum between Chinese and Hongkongers (1 = Chinese, 2 = Hong Kong Chinese, 3 = Chinese Hongkonger, 4 = Hongkonger). We standardized the five items and created the moderating variable by taking their mean (min = –2.17, max = 1.49, M = –.00, SD = .63, Cronbach's α = .63).

Street Protest Participation. Street protest participation was measured as the intensity of participation. Specifically, respondents were asked how many days they participated in the protests and how many nights they stayed overnight at the protest sites. On average, respondents spent 3.44 days (SD = 5.94, min = 0, max = 36, α_3 = 2.90) and 1.00 night (SD = 2.98, min = 0, max = 30, α_3 = 5.09) on the protest sites. The variable of street protest participation was created by averaging the two items that were standardized beforehand (r = .59, $p < .001$, min = –.46, max = 7.11, M = .00, SD = .90). To improve normality, the variable was square-root transformed.

Control Variables. The control factors in our analysis include demographics (i.e., gender, school year, family income, and hometown), political interest, political efficacy, and political discussion network. Compared with the census data provided by the Census and Statistic Department of Hong Kong, the sample is representative of the Hong Kong university students in terms of gender ratio.[2] However, it underrepresented local students by 17.67%, which may be a result of disseminating the questionnaires at the student canteens. We measured political interest by asking respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I am interested in politics" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; M = 3.13, SD = 1.04).

For political efficacy, we examined internal political efficacy, collective efficacy, and external efficacy, respectively. We measured internal political efficacy by asking the respondents about their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements "I have

the ability to understand political matters" and "I have the ability to talk about and participate in public affairs" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The variable was computed by taking the mean of the two items (M = 3.26, SD = .90, r = .81). Similarly, we assessed collective efficacy using the statements "The collective actions of Hong Kong people can improve the society" and "The collective actions of Hong Kong people have much influence on public affairs" (M = 3.67; SD = .79, r = .56). The external political efficacy was assessed with the items "The political system in Hong Kong is responsive to public opinion" and "The Hong Kong government is responsive to public opinion" (M = 2.26; SD = .99, r = .70).

To measure political discussion network, we asked respondents how many family members, classmates, and friends they had talked with about issues related to the protests, respectively; the scale was created by taking the sum of the three items (min = 0, max = 85, M = 23.12, SD = 17.62, Cronbach's α = .63).

Results

Overall, 15.6% of the respondents (N = 120) engaged in politically motivated selective avoidance on Facebook. Specifically, 11.4% of the respondents (N = 88) reported hiding others' comments or posts on Facebook because of view disagreement, and 9.0% of them (N = 69) reported unfriending someone on Facebook. A total of 4.8% of the respondents (N = 37) reported to have engaged in both forms of selective avoidance.

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, we first conducted a mediation analysis with protest-related Facebook use as the independent variable (X), street protest participation as the dependent variable (Y), and selective avoidance operationalized as unfriending and hiding content as the two binary mediating variables (Ms). We used Kenny's (2008) mediation with dichotomous outcome method to compute the indirect effects. Multiple group analysis was then conducted to test the moderation effects. The moderator perceived out-group threat was converted into a two-quartile categorical variable (i.e., low-level perceived out-group threat [N = 381, M = –.48, SD = .43] and high-level perceived out-group threat [N = 381, M = .48, SD = .39]). Stata 14.1 was used to perform the analysis.

The mediation analysis suggests a mediation relationship between protest-related Facebook use and actual participation in the street protests through politically motivated Facebook unfriending but not through hiding disagreeing content (see Table 1). Specifically, Facebook use predicts unfriending (b = 1.01, SE = .17, p < .001) and hiding content (b = .63, SE = .14, p < .001), supporting H1. Unfriending is significantly and positively associated with participation in the street protests, when controlling for Facebook use (b = .12, SE = .04, p < .01). However, hiding content is not significantly associated with protest participation (b = .01, SE = .04, p = .72). H5 is thus only partially supported. There is also a direct relationship between protest-related Facebook use and actual participation in the street protests (b = .10, SE = .01, p < .001), when controlling for unfriending and hiding content. H3 is thus supported. However, the proportion of the total effect mediated is .16, which is considered small.

The multiple group analysis shows that the relationship between Facebook use and selective avoidance is contingent on perceived out-group threat. That is, as the perceived threat intensifies, the positive relationship between Facebook use and selective avoidance strengthens. Specifically, the relationship between Facebook use and unfriending among the respondents who reported high-level perceived out-group threat has a larger effect size than that among those who reported low-level threat (b = .12, SE = .02, p < .000; b = .03, SE = .01, p < .05). Similarly, the effect size of the relationship between Facebook use and hiding content among those reporting high-level perceived out-group threat is larger than

Table 1
Summary of the mediation analysis ($N = 715$)

	Consequence											
	Unfriending (M1) a1			Hiding content (M2) a2			Protest participation (Y) c			Protest participation (Y) c'		
Antecedent	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*	Coeff.	*SE*	*P*	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*
Facebook use (X)	1.01	.17	.000	.63	.14	.000	.11	.01	.000	.10	.01	.000
Unfriending (M1)										.12	.04	.006
Hiding content (M2)										.01	.04	.720
Constant	–3.85	1.07	.000	–3.21	.97	.001	.44	.09	.000	.44	.09	.000
Gender	–.30	.28	.284	–.21	.25	.389	–.05	.02	.017	–.05	.02	.022
School year	.17	.12	.164	.10	.11	.344	.03	.01	.002	.03	.01	.004
Family income	–.00	.00	.728	–.00	.00	.276	–.00	.00	.163	–.00	.00	.172
Hometown (Hong Kong)	–.66	.45	.145	–.27	.45	.543	.00	.04	.956	.01	.04	.809
Hometown (mainland China)	–.93	.54	.087	–.58	.51	.254	–.06	.05	.185	–.05	.05	.265
Political interest	.19	.17	.272	–.00	.15	1.000	.03	.02	.022	.03	.01	.029
Internal efficacy	–.02	.21	.934	–.05	.18	.798	.01	.02	.685	.01	.02	.679

(*Continued*)

Table 1
(*Continued*)

	Consequence											
	Unfriending (M1) a1			Hiding content (M2) a2			Protest participation (Y) c			Protest participation (Y) c'		
Antecedent	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*	Coeff.	*SE*	*P*	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*	Coeff.	*SE*	*p*
Collective efficacy	–.26	.20	.195	–.05	.18	.783	.03	.02	.116	.03	.02	.086
External efficacy	–.29	.14	.033	.06	.12	.604	–.01	.01	.308	–.01	.01	.418
Discussion network	.00	.01	.568	–.00	.01	.677	.00	.00	.000	.00	.00	.000
Pseudo R^2/Adj R^2	.15			.07			.23			.24		
LR Chi^2/*F*	67.97***			32.84***			20.51***			18.40***		
Indirect effect 1 (unfriending)	.05											
Indirect effect 2 (hiding content)	.00											
Total indirect effect	.05											
Direct effect	.29											
Total effect	.35											

Notes. M refers to mediating variable; Y refers to dependent variable; X refers to independent variable.
Unstandardized regression coefficients.
*** $p < .001$.

that among those with low-level threat (b = .08, SE = .02, p < .000; b = .04, SE = .02, p < .05). H2 is thus supported. However, the effect size of the relationship between Facebook use and protest participation does not differ between the two groups (b = .09, SE = .02, p < .000; b = .09, SE = .02, p < .000). It means that the direct relationship between Facebook use and protest participation is not conditional on perceived out-group threat. H4 is thus rejected.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings indicate that nearly one in six student respondents hid others' posts or unfriended someone on Facebook because of political disagreement during the three months of protests. This is higher than that during politically stable periods, according to the U.S. data; only 9% of American social network site users blocked, unfriended, or hid someone's posts because of political disagreement in their entire histories of usage (Rainie & Smith, 2012). The difference in selective avoidance levels may be a result of measurement discrepancy; we measured selective avoidance as unfriending someone and hiding content, whereas Rainie and Smith (2012) only focused on the dissolution of social ties. Because hiding content does not directly affect social relationships and is less emotionally involved than severing personal ties, people may be less reluctant to engage in the former than the latter when encountering view dissonance. Yet the amount of selective avoidance documented here is similar to what John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) observed during the Israel-Gaza armed conflict in 2014, suggesting that public contestation in the times of political crisis may promote selective avoidance on social media. First of all, people tend to talk less about politics and are thus less likely to be exposed to disagreement in a politically stable environment than during a major political event. Even when facing political disagreement, without the contentious and polarizing context, people may have greater tolerance because they are less likely to hold extreme views or strong convictions. People may also hold back from hiding comments and unfriending others because of social values embedded in social ties and information they transmit. However, in times of political turmoil, such values are likely to be less important (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). The benefit of social endorsement of information on cross-cutting exposure may thus also fade (Messing & Westwood, 2014). In addition, the high-level selective avoidance may be also a result of the high-risk nature of the context; the wide belief that the Chinese authorities were spying on democracy protestors online and fear that protest participation would lead to real consequences such as arrest and blacklist may have made people suspicious of and avoid interacting with people with conflicting viewpoints.

Previous studies suggest that social media use can create a heterogeneous socio-informational environment and expose users to great political diversity (Ellison et al., 2007; Kim, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2014). However, our results show that active use of social media for protest-related matters is associated with greater likelihood of people shielding themselves from attitude-challenging views. These two findings are not necessarily contradictory as political diversity may be a condition for selective avoidance to occur. That is, active use of social media comes with increased and repeated exposure to dissonant information and perspectives, which can increase the chance of selective avoidance. Particularly, for those who actively engage in protest-related social media activities, cross-cutting exposure may constitute a high-level stimulus to selective avoidance because they tend to be more emotionally and cognitively involved. This study did not empirically examine the relationship between social media use and cross-cutting

exposure as a precondition for selective avoidance but conceptualizes social media use as an experience that exposes users to heterogeneous information and views. Future studies should thus try to include specific measures of cross-cutting exposure into the models.

Moreover, when facing attitude-incongruent information and perspectives, it is still largely up to individuals to decide whether to avoid or be exposed to them. And such decisions are made within specific social and political contexts. Our findings suggest that, against a backdrop of political turmoil and polarization, perceived threats from out-groups may catalyze acts of selective avoidance on social media. This is consistent with the existing finding that perceived out-group threat is associated with low-level tolerance toward out-groups and high-level in-group identification that could lead to social fragmentation (Riek et al., 2006). Specifically, viewpoint dissonance present on social media may reflect or be arrayed in accordance with the real-world disagreement between different sides of a debate. Attitude-incongruent views are likely to be seen as dissenting voices of the other sides that challenge the in-group's position, thus perceived as illegitimate, threatening, and offensive. While perception of out-group threat within a politically unstable and polarized society disposes people toward rejection of disagreeing views, social media affords them the opportunities to create insulated ego-centric networks that can shield them from hearing the other sides.

Such selective avoidance may indicate a certain level of intolerance of disagreeing opinions of out-groups. It is a gesture that reflects and contributes to the restriction of the opponents' opinions from entering and circulating in the sphere of civil debate. Selective avoidance is likely to deepen the existing social divisions and diminish the possibilities for deliberation and reconciliation between different sides. It works not only against the principle values of deliberative democracy, but it may also hamper the functioning of a democratic system that relies on consensus building.

Nonetheless, we find that selective avoidance, particularly Facebook unfriending, is associated with high-level non-institutionalized political participation (i.e., participation in street protests). It not only directly relates to higher-level protest participation but also mediates the positive relationship between social media use and participation. It is inconsistent with the previous finding that political disagreement is associated with greater likelihood of being involved in future activism-oriented political activities such as protests (Pattie & Johnston, 2009). The discrepancy may be a result of the different measurement. As Pattie and Johnston (2009) measured participation as willingness to participate in hypothetical events; they did not contextualize the level of social contention and risks involved. By permanently removing contacts with disagreeing political views, a person is able to create a social enclave with similar-minded others that provides support, viewpoint conformity, and an enhanced sense of belonging and identity, which are all necessary facilitators of participation in contentious politics. In a sense, selective avoidance that suppresses political differences could promote actions leading to political change. However, not all forms of selective avoidance have such implications. We find that hiding unwanted dissonant information and views on Facebook does not predict participation in the street protests. Hiding content achieves selective avoidance without sacrificing the values of the social ties, and hence may be less emotionally charged than unfriending. Besides, it does not eliminate future exposure to dissonant views entirely, compared with unfriending, although the action of hiding content can feed into the social media algorithm, reducing the chance of encountering similar content.

This study has limitations. First, although the model suggests a specific sequence of actions, the current findings do not imply causality as they are based on cross-sectional data. Future research is needed to identify the direction of the sequence—specifically,

whether selective avoidance leads to increased political participation or vice versa. Second, the measurement of selective avoidance needs to be improved. We did not include the options of unfollowing and blocking in our measure. By unfollowing someone, a user stops receiving updates from that person while still remaining friends. By blocking someone, the user not only removes that person from the friend list but also prevents that person from seeing his or her Facebook profile. Selective avoidance includes a repertoire of behaviors associated with different levels of severity, ranging from removing specific content that does not affect the sources of information to completely eliminating any contact with the sources. Moreover, the level of selective avoidance may vary across different types of the practice. For example, hiding content and unfollowing someone may be more common than unfriending or blocking someone on Facebook because the former can screen out unwanted information without severing social ties and is thus less emotionally involved than the latter. The differences among hiding posts, unfollowing someone, unfriending someone, or blocking someone on Facebook may have different implications for participation in contentious political activities, as suggested by the current study. Future research could measure the four behaviors as indicators of selective avoidance and estimate their implications respectively. In addition, this study depends on participants' self-report of selective avoidance. Future research could combine it with computationally tracking digital traces of the behaviors over time.

To summarize, selective avoidance can turn a heterogeneous social media environment from a market-place of ideas into more insulated communities. Such a scenario is more likely in the times of political turmoil and polarization when deliberation and consensus building are actually most needed. Through the choices that individuals make on social media, division and polarization in the larger social environment are internalized into personal social networks and thus fortified. Findings of this study present a troubling picture of social media use's (un)democratic implications. Selective avoidance afforded by social media mechanisms may fuel the development of a fragmented civil society where each side rarely hears voices of the other, participation for its own causes grows strong, disagreement becomes irreconcilable, and conflict intensifies. As the social media environment opens the gate to political differences that can challenge our preconceptions, it also affords us a greater ability to fortify our preconceptions with a click of a button. The theoretical and practical dilemma thus lingers further: How can we reconcile the value of cross-cutting exposure for deliberation and reasoned decision making with the benefits of selective avoidance for taking direct actions that promote political change?

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. http://www.go-globe.hk/blog/social-media-hong-kong/
2. http://cdcf.ugc.edu.hk/cdcf/statEntry.do?language=EN

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