Youth Social Movements and the Consolidation of Hongkonger's Distinct Identity Before and After the Introduction of the New National Security Law

Aqmal Afiq *Shamsul Bahri*[*]
Geetha *Govindasamy (Corresponding author)*[°] Nur Shahadah *Jamil*[•]
[*]Department of East Asian Studies, Universiti Malaya
[°]Department of East Asian Studies, Universiti Malaya
[•]Institute of China Studies, Universiti Malaya

Abstract

In 2020, Hong Kong implemented the New National Security Law (NNSL), effectively ending citizens' protests in the city. Between 2014 and 2022, youths spearheaded various protests, including the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest and the 2020 NNSL Protest. Drawing on interviews with youth protesters and secondary sources, this study explores the connection between youth social movements and the exclusive identity of Hongkongers. This paper combines Christiansen's (2009) stages of social movement theory with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory to explain the progression of youth movements that shaped the 'we' versus 'they' identity in Hong Kong. The research underscores the impact of mainland China's intervention in local affairs, which has bolstered a civic identity in opposition to a state-constructed national identity.

Keywords: *New National Security Law, Youth social movements, identity politics, Hong Kong, Mainland China.*

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[*] PhD Candidate at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Malaya.

[°] Senior lecturer at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysia. She can be reached at <geethag@um.edu.my>.

[•] Senior Lecturer at Institute of China Studies (ICS), University of Malaya.

1. Introduction

The participation of youths in political movements has received much attention in academic research (Melucci, 1996; Constanza-Chock, 2012; Earl, Jennifer and Elliot, 2017). Constanza-Chock (2012) asserted historically, youth participation in social movements shows that young people are significant in many progressive social movements. Other than that, active participation by youths as well as their political socialization is apparent in protests as well as other forms of both conventional and non-conventional politics (Earl, Jennifer and Elliot, 2017). When youths' aspirations and collective feelings do not converge with the government's policies and are perceived as threatening their core values, the mobilization of social movement becomes imminent to demand more rights and changes. When involvement in conventional politics through official platforms is no longer feasible in producing positive outcomes, youths tend to seek opportunities to mobilize through collective activism and social movements. Countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Taiwan have had experiences in protests against their government led by the youth. The political trajectories and aspirations for more democratic governance have led to street protests, with youth directly engaged in the political space. This movement has somewhat bound these countries, forming a Milk Tea Alliance (Chan, 2023).

Similarly, in recent years, Hong Kong has become a prominent stage for youths to mobilize social movements and stage their protests against mainland China's increasing intervention in the city's domestic affairs. The retaliation of youths against the increasing intervention of mainland China over their rights forced Beijing to take a drastic response. The New National Security Law (NNSL) was implemented in 2020 as a response from Beijing to deter protests and as a way to maintain public order since youth protests became rampant and unpredictable. So much so that China declared the mobilization of youth social movements as an act of terrorism (BBC, 2022). Davis (2020) asserted that the introduction of NNSL by mainland China, which ultimately bypassed the consultation of both public and domestic legislative, has caused the autonomous status of Hong Kong to be frowned upon. NNSL has also exerted control over Hongkonger's citizens' rights and judiciary, resulting in the city's truncated autonomy (Lo, 2020). The implementation of NNSL is perceived by youths as eroding democratic values and autonomy that was granted in the 1997 Hong Kong handover by the British to China. The participation of youths in Hong Kong protests

has amplified the importance of preserving Hongkonger's identity. Youth have also increasingly distanced themselves from the values of mainland China, with such influences becoming an important part of the identity of Hongkongers (Gareth and Ho, 2014; Fung and Chan, 2016; Ortman 2020). The implementation of the NNSL has meant that the identity of Hong Kong residents is facing an existential threat due to the violation of the city's autonomous status. This is particularly evident with banning social protests, which leaves no space for Hongkongers to oppose, which is one of the more important elements of democracy.

To describe Hong Kong's identity, Ping and Kin-ming (2014) pointed out that the identity has been developed through distinct cultural elements, such as language, tradition, history and collective memory. Therefore, although they are identified as Chinese ethnically, like the Chinese in mainland China, the increasing assertions of Beijing's influence have caused Hongkongers to distance themselves from their Chinese identity and adopt a more localized identity instead. In a similar vein, Ortman (2017) pointed out that Hong Kong identity has been a result of the domestic political situation where there is a growing influence of China's central government in the city. Further, Steinhardt, Li and Jiang (2017) stated that the compatibility between national and local identities, which was prevalent for many years after the 1997 handover, has gradually eroded in recent years due to increasing distrust towards China's central government. More recently, scholars have pointed out that Hongkonger's identity is also based on the interactions between Hong Kong and China, which has resulted in a more civic uniqueness in comparison to the constructed state-identity by mainland China (Kwan, 2016; Veg, 2017; So and Ip, 2019; Chou, Fu, and Ng, 2020). Due to this, there has been a significant rise in upholding Hong Kong's identity recently, weakening Chinese nationalism, resulting from a shift in identity from three generations since 1997 in which Hong Kong and China have increasingly been perceived as separate entities (Kam, 2020).

This paper focuses on Hongkonger's exclusive identity that is projected through youth social movements after the implementation of NNSL, that has forbidden any form of political gatherings. The paper examines the development and outcomes of youth social movements from the Umbrella Movement (2014), the Anti-Extradition Bill Protest (2017) and the implementation of NNSL (2020) (see Table 1). Although these series of protests are grounded in political issues, the movement eventually

evolved into a discourse on Hongkonger's identity. This paper proposes that the implementation of NNSL has in fact paved the way for youth social movements to further consolidate Hongkonger's identity rather than deny it or even adopt a mainland Chinese identity exclusively. Hence, the question is how do protests consolidate an exclusive Hong Kong identity through the lens of youth social movements?

Table 1. Series of Youth Protests and Outcomes

Year	Name of Protest	Issues	Outcomes
2014	Umbrella Movement	Demands for universal suffrage	Mainland China continues to interfere in Hong Kong's electoral system
2017	Anti-Extradition Bill Protest	Protesting against the extradition bill introduced by mainland China for Hong Kong and Taiwan	The withdrawal of the bill and NNSL was promulgated to replace
2020	Protest against the implementation of NNSL	Demands for the cancellation of the proposed NNSL	The official implementation of NNSL in Hong Kong

Source: Developed by authors

However, protests such as the 2003 Anti-Article 23 and 2012 National Education protests have been omitted from this paper for several reasons. First, this paper seeks to focus on how youth social movements have contributed to the consolidation of Hongkonger's distinct identity due to the 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests. These protests are directly linked to the discourse of autonomy and resilience against mainland China's encroachments, which are significant to the implications of NNSL. However, the 2003 and 2012 protests are not as directly related to the discussion of NNSL compared to the 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests. Second, 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests marked critical points in the evolution of Hongkonger's identity in response to the encroachment of mainland China. Youth resilience and insistence became more visibly intense, which resulted in Hongkonger's identity becoming more pronounced. The 2003 and 2012 protests, however, were not as impactful in capturing this shift. Third, the protests discussed in this paper are exemplified by the involvement of youth, who play a prominent role in organizing, mobilizing and defining the movements. Though youths were involved in the 2003 and 2012 protests, their role was

not as prominent and transformative as in the later protests. Fourth, the protests discussed in this paper reflect a generational shift in youth social movements. The protesters are of a newer generation compared to those involved in earlier protests.

Past scholarly works point to the existence of a relationship between social movements and identity in Hong Kong. Kwan (2016) observed that the increase of civic nationalism within Hongkongers that has mobilized social movements was due to the rejection of the nationalism centered around mainland China's interpretation of Ethno-Chinese. Au (2017) argued that the social movements in Hong Kong, which enlist participants through collective identity, represent the Hongkonger's part of a continuous struggle for their distinctive identity. Putting youth in the context of social protests, Pearce (2009) believed that student movements in Hong Kong have acted as the conscience of the locals, working towards their well-being and expressing their strong sense of identity as Hongkongers, which is demonstrated in their willingness to protest. To highlight youth willingness to participate in a protest, Cai (2016) posited that most youth participants in the 2014 Umbrella Movement participated due to their discontentment with the declining democracy in the city. In relation to youth resistance against NNSL, Chan (2003) posits that the youth are resilient in resisting the new law because it reflects mainland China's encroachment which has created a political low-pressure zone for them. In addition, youths blamed both Hong Kong and mainland China's governments for suppressing freedom of speech and the right to protest in the city. Not surprisingly, Mei (2021) remarked that youths in Hong Kong identify more as Hongkongers instead of Chinese due to China's officious political values, leading to a stronger Hong Kong identity. In other words, the more China tries to assert control over Hong Kong's local governance, the stronger the mobilization of social protests by the youths is. Nevertheless, this is a blanket statement as it neglects the 'how' in the premise, only explains the 'what' of the situation, and heavily looks at the relationship between youth social movements and identity as a controlled and independent variable.

2.   Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach through assessing and exploring the series of youth protests in Hong Kong. Youth respondents were gathered using snowballing technique from contacting a prominent youth protester

who wanted to remain anonymous due to safety reasons. Data was collected through the distribution of a semi-structured questionnaire to 20 youths, age ranging from 16 to 30 (during the protests), who were involved in the three protests in Hong Kong between 2014 and 2020 (see Table 2). This ensured that the information gathered on the respondents' opinions and positions on the political landscape and their stories, motives, and perceptions covered three protests.

Table 2. Respondents Involved in Hong Kong Protests, 2014 - 2020

Protests	Number of Youth Respondents
Involved in 2014 Umbrella Movement	5
Involved in Anti-Extradition Bill Protest	6
Involved in Anti-NNSL campaign and protest	9

Source: Developed by author

Due to the vague interpretation of NNSL, there is an increasing fear within Hongkonger's in discussing matters related to the Hong Kong political situation as there is a risk for them to be detained for participating in such discussions. Subsequent to this, in order to minimize the risk for the respondents as well as acknowledge the sensitivity of the topic, the questions were sent through an instant messaging mobile application, "Telegram". The process of theme development was driven by significant conceptual ideas relevant to this study, such as Hong Kong youth social movements, Hong Kong identity and NNSL. The data gathered from the respondents were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings were then corroborated with secondary sources, including scholarly works and news reports. The findings of this study were then constructed through the identification of patterns based on the responses of the respondents.

3.   Theoretical Framework: New Social Movement, Stages of Social Movement and Social Identity Theory

There are many theories used to study youth movements in Hong Kong. For example, these include but are not limited to 'conscientization' popularized by Paulo Freire, relative deprivation theory, political opportunity theory, resource mobilization theory and so on. The 'conscientization' theory posits that youths should encourage humanization via peaceful means by using

social media to implement structural changes (Reyes, 2022). Classical social movement theories are able to examine the youth protests in Hong Kong but are not feasible for the specific case in this study, leaving a requirement for an applicable conceptual framework. On the other hand, relative deprivation theory pointed out that the general cause of mobilization of social movements is due to social inequality (Morrison, 1971; Gurney and Tierney; 1982; Flynn, 2011). Although it is acknowledged that the youth protest in Hong Kong does involve an element of social inequality, relative deprivation theory is unable to examine the identity struggle of the Hongkongers. Whereas, resource mobilization theory insinuated resources as the most important element in the mobilization of social movements. Resources include both economic and human capital (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; Flynn, 2011). Flynn (2011) suggests that there is a higher likelihood of successful mobilization of social movements when there are more resources available. This, however, falls short of examining youth protest and identity in Hong Kong, as the issues of economic and human capital are not the main scope of the case study. Another prominent classical social movement theory, political opportunity theory, looked at the political environment and political openness as the main factors in the mobilization of social movements (Eisinger, 1973; Beyeler and Rucht, 1996; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). While this theory is applicable in examining the youth social movements in Hong Kong, where the domestic political situation provides an opportunity for the youth to mobilize protests and collective efforts, it is unable to address the development of Hongkonger's identity. The inability of the three major classical social movement theories to examine this case study has led to the use of a new conceptual framework that is developed through a combination of New Social Movements theory and social identity theory that enables the examination of how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity after the introduction of the NNSL. Because classical social movement theories are inadequate to examine how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity, the next section discusses the two theories that will be applied to examine the case study of this paper.

3.1   *New Social Movement Theory*

The New Social Movement Theory (NSM) serves as the most viable theory to examine how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity. Calhoun (1993) stated that the NSM shifted the focus of social

movements from focusing on economic discourse and inequality towards values-oriented goals such as lifestyle, ethics and identity. Melucci (1996) emphasized that collective identity plays a prominent role in the cause of new social movements in which identity serves as shared feelings of a community against inequality. Many social movement scholars have since agreed and used Melucci's definition of NSM as a reference for their works (Avritzer and Lyrra, 1997; Martin, 2001; Vahabzadeh, 2001; Buechler, 2013). They concede that NSM contrasts with the traditional mobilizations of labor movements, where class difference is highlighted as the vital point in politics, and any social issue can be solved through economic transformation. The understanding of NSM integrated with the work of Aberle (1996) and Christiansen (2006) helps in the examination of how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity. Aberle (1966) significantly stated that the social movements are characterized by a diverse range of activism. Table 3 describes the four categories of social movements by Aberle.

Table 3. Aberle's Four Categorizations of Social Movements

| Social Movements			
Types	**Target**	**Change**	**Objective**
Alternative	Specific individuals	Limited	Focused on self-improvement and specific change in individuals
Redemptive	Specific Individuals	Radical	Provoke inner change or spiritual growth in individuals
Reformative	Everyone	Limited	Seek to shift a specific matter in social structure
Revolutionary	Everyone	Radical	Seek to completely change every aspect of society in a dramatic way

Source: Adopted from Aberle (1966)

Through the examination of Aberle's categorization of social movements, it is possible to identify that the social movements in Hong Kong belong to reformative social movements. This is because youth social movements look at identity as a matter that concerns Hongkongers and that the demand for change means reforming the political institution to grant Hongkongers more autonomy in the effort of protecting their identity. This categorization serves as the conceptual framework for understanding the nexus between youth social movements and identity formation.

3.2 Stages of Social Movements

The stages of social movements framework enable analysis of the developmental process of social emergence from its emergence to its decline as shown in figure 1. This framework allows for the examination of the development of Hong Kong youth social movements, from the 2014 Umbrella Movement until their decline due to the implementation of NNSL in 2020. This study adopted the stages of social movement theory of Christiansen (2009) which was developed from previous works of Blumer (1995), Mauss (1975) and Tilly (1978). Christiansen stated that there are four stages of social movements: (1) emergence, (2) coalescence, (3) bureaucratization, and (4) decline. The emergence is the stage that marks the beginning of collective actions driven by shared sense of dissatisfaction with values perceived as a threat to the norms of a community. The second stage, coalescence displays the start of the collective actions that are more coordinated and organized where roles are established. The third stage of social movement is bureaucratization in which awareness of one particular issue that is being fought for are successfully formed and the movement requires a more structured strategy. Lastly, the final stage of social movements is the decline. Christiansen insinuated that social movements should not be considered as failures if they decline; at times, their decline could also indicate a success. The causes of decline in social movements include repression by authority, cooptation by agency or individuals, the achievement of the movement's goals, and the acceptance of the movement's ideology as a new norm in the society. The stages of social movements are as shown in Figure 1 below:
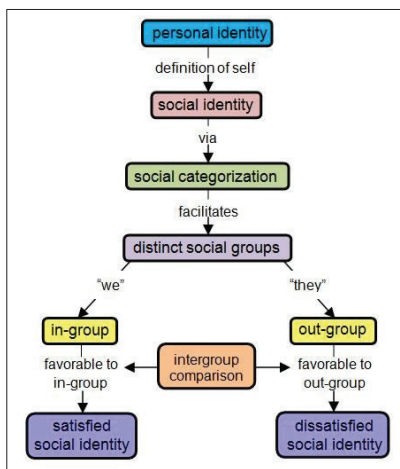
Figure 1. Stages of Social Movements
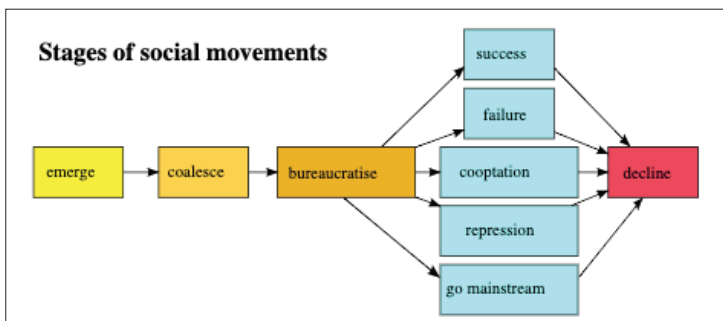
Source: Adopted from Christiansen (2009)

3.3 Social Identity Theory

To examine Hong Kong identity in particular, this study has adopted the social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory clarifies the concepts of 'in-group' and 'out-group' that helps to explain the youth social movements intergroup comparison in Hong Kong. This comparison helps them to strengthen their sense of self-communion by rejecting mainland Chinese values and identity. Moreover, the social identity theory enables the analysis between the formation of satisfied social identity (Hongkongers) and dissatisfied identity (Chinese identity). Social identity theory also involves the identification of social categories within groups, which allows individuals to determine which category they belong to and develop a sense of belonging that contributes to their self-definition. The first step in categorizing 'we' and 'they' is by separating defined behaviors in reference to the group norms that fit their social environment. Next, social identification is achieved through a sense of membership that is formed by creating a sense of belonging. The next stage is social comparison where a competition between two identities is formed in order to maintain self-esteem. In this stage, an enhancement of self-identity is projected by narrating a bad impression towards the dissatisfied identity, which in turn would form the 'we' and 'they' identities. Figure 2 demonstrates the stages of social identity in the creation of satisfied against dissatisfied identities.
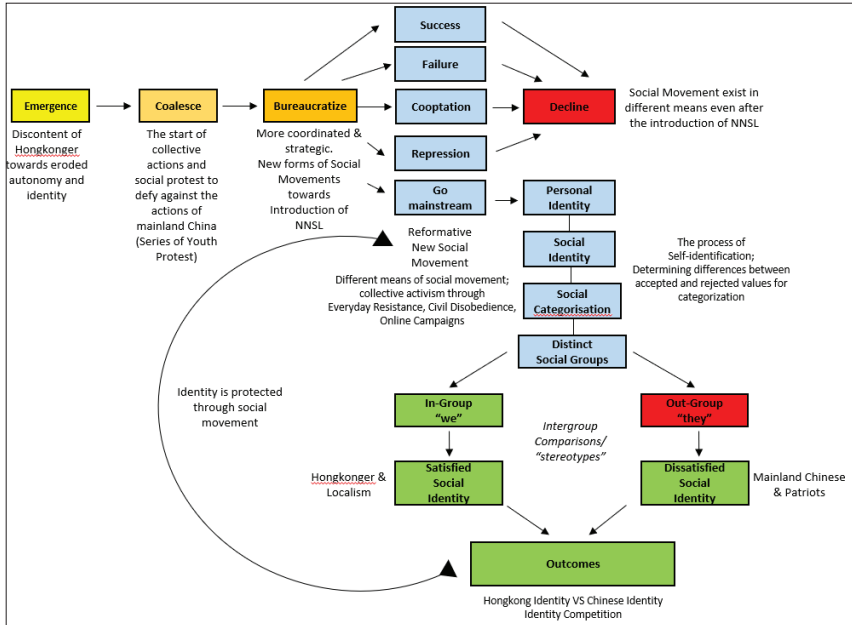
Figure 2. Social Identity Theory

Source: Adapted from Tajfel and Turner (1979)

3.4   Conceptual Framework

Figure 3. Conceptual framework combining Stages of Social Movement and Social Identity Theories

Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 3 shows the conceptual framework for this research which is a combination of stages of social movements and social identity theories which enables the explanation of how youth social movements began consolidating Hongkongers' identity between 2014 and 2020. The premise is that the youth social movements in Hong Kong are considered a success if China relinquishes its assertion of influence over Hong Kong, whereas the failure of protest would be marked by the disintegration of social movements. Generally, the youth social movements in Hong Kong passed the stage of 'go mainstream' in which movements looked at alternative means to project their sense of collectivism to achieve a specific goal. In this sense, it was to maintain and strengthen Hongkonger's identity that included both autonomy and democratic values and more importantly, the rejection of Chinese identity. The rejection is then exemplified through social identity theory which highlights how social categorization distinguishes Hongkongers from

Chinese identity and create rather positive projections of their own identity. The identity is then protected through reformative social movements which targets everyone (Hongkongers) and aims at shifting specific matter in social structure (autonomy to strengthen identity).

4.   Research Findings

The series of protests in Hong Kong, apart from going against the assertion of mainland China's increasing influence in the city, has shown the development of projecting and protecting Hongkonger's identity. It is imperative to understand the narratives and definition of Hongkonger's identity from the lens of youth as they were the leading actor in the series of protests from 2014 until the implementation of NNSL in 2020. Through thematic analysis, three major themes were identified based on the data collected from the respondents. The findings show that the discussion on how youth social movements consolidated Hongkongers identity is rather multifaceted and complex.

4.1   *Hongkonger's Characteristics and Identity Consolidated through Youth Social Movements*

This section presents youth respondents' perception over the descriptions and characteristics of Hongkongers. Then, these values are examined and explained based on the conceptual framework designed. This enables the assessment of how the Hongkonger's identity is consolidated through youth social movements. Firstly, all respondents agreed that Hongkonger's identity is about valuing democracy and the right to free speech, which they believe is distinctly different from mainland China's idea of identity. They believed that Hong Kong should have the autonomy to decide its own future, and that the government should be accountable to its citizens. Respondents also highlighted the importance of being able to voice out opinions without the fear of repression. According to several respondents, the core of Hong Kong identity is the shared belief in the importance of democracy and free speech. The youths saw themselves as a community that strongly values the ability to voice out opinions and participate in the political process. One respondent stated, "*we believe in the freedom of speech and democracy while China Communist Party (CCP) tries to oppress us. What the Hongkongers share is the identity of mutual discontentment against mainland China.*"

The sentiment was supported by others who also emphasized the importance of these values in shaping Hong Kong's identity as a distinct community. The respondents believed that the ability to express freely is a defining characteristic of Hong Kong, and they feel that their identity is under threat from China's attempt to limit those freedoms. One respondent stated; "*Mainland China has betrayed us, the Hongkongers, and I think that due to that, we separate ourselves from them. We realized China will never grant us democracy and that is the value we think can describe us, the Hongkongers*". The belief in the importance of democracy and freedom of speech is seen as a unifying force that sets Hong Kong apart from mainland China. Despite recent challenges to these values, respondents collectively expressed a strong belief in the importance of upholding them. They view the ability to express themselves freely as a fundamental aspect of their identity, and that they were committed to defending these values.

Secondly, respondents also identified *One Country, Two Systems* as a key principle that shapes Hong Kong's identity. They viewed this principle as a cornerstone of Hong Kong's unique identity, allowing them to maintain their own political and economic systems while still being part of mainland China. One respondent explained, "*Hong Kong identity is about the difference in the system. We are used to the system that we are practicing and it should be protected*. The principle of *One Country, Two Systems* has been a source of tension in recent years, as some respondents see it as being undermined by mainland China's actions. They view it as a way to maintain a distinct identity while still being part of mainland China. This arrangement is also seen as a way to protect Hong Kong's unique way of life, including its freedom and autonomy. Respondents expressed a strong belief in the importance of maintaining this system as they see it as a fundamental aspect of Hong Kong's identity. This view is grounded by the belief that Hongkongers should have the right to govern themselves and determine their own future. This is reflected through responses such as "*Hong Kong identity is about the differences in the system. We are used to the system that we have been practicing and it should be protected and We believe that One Country, Two Systems provides us space to practice our rights in democracy and freedom to voice it out*". These statements evidently highlight the importance of autonomy in Hong Kong identity which is seen by the youth as means to protect unique aspects of Hong Kong's cultural and political systems. Youths also believed that the autonomy granted has been eroding

for quite some time, significantly since the 2014 Umbrella Movements where mainland China's intervention in local governance became more obvious. 16 out of 20 respondents insinuated that they have been betrayed by the Chinese government through their refusal to provide Hongkongers' the autonomy that was promised under the *One Country, Two Systems* principle. Hence, this theme reflects the desire of Hongkongers to project their own identity by perceiving themselves as a unique community, distinctly different from their mainland Chinese counterparts.

Moving on, youth respondents also agreed that Hongkonger's identity is distinct from mainland Chinese due to the differences in culture. They believe that Hong Kong should be perceived as its own community and should not be culturally associated with mainland China. Respondents who expressed this theme believed that Hong Kong has its own practice that includes the differences in language usage, customs, and way of life. Among the prominent differences are politics and language in which Hong Kong is more democratic and the usage of Cantonese is prevalent as the main language on the island. One respondent stated because of these differences, which are "...*different from mainland Chinese, we identify ourselves as our own unique community*." Another respondent expressed pride in the fact that the people of Hong Kong are now able to live as "*One unified community*" and emphasized the importance of Beijing understanding this fact. These sentiments were echoed by other respondents who underlined that Hong Kong has its own unique cultural identity, and that they see themselves as Hongkongers, the people of Hong Kong rather than a citizen of mainland China. Language seemed to be a crucial part of Hong Kong's cultural identity. For example, in emphasizing this narrative, one respondent stated while mainland China has shown its policy preference of using Mandarin in formal and official matters to replace Cantonese, there is a significant refusal within the Hongkongers to acknowledge the usage of Mandarin. This attempt to switch languages is perceived by youths as threatening Hongkonger's distinct identity.

It is also imperative to include the opposing reactions against these values and features. An ex-official of mainland Chinese government stated that Hong Kong identity is considered 'non-existent' as it is used to provide a reason to reject mainland China's influence in the city's political issues. Furthermore, the ex-official added that the idea of Hongkonger's identity is driven by the refusal of the Hongkongers to acknowledge their weakness in

understanding the political position and relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. In this context, it is insinuated that it is easier for the Hongkonger to blame Mainland China's interference in local political affairs as threatening their exclusive identity when Mainland China only wants to restore public order. There is also a sense of scepticism against the narrative that youth protested to protect their identity. Bing (2022) stated that many youths romanticize the movements as it became popular while disregarding the real motivations behind the protests, using identity as the main discourse and arguments, when it is unclear whether or not mainland China is really planning to break Hongkonger's identity. Bing also added that there is also a sense of injustice regarding the term 'they' used by the Hongkongers to refer to mainland Chinese, as the term is highly demonized, portrayed as obedient to communist authorities or brainwashed. Other than that, while the youth protesters have described that the *One Country, Two Systems* as an arrangement that would uphold Hongkonger's identity, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, had stated otherwise. Xi firmly stated during the 25th anniversary of Hongkong's return to China that mainland China would reassert that Hong Kong's autonomy under the *One Country, Two Systems* would be upheld, but with Beijing's full jurisdiction (Yiu, 2022). Xi also insinuated that mainland China has an obligation over the security of Hong Kong and that the recent series of protests is a threat to national security. Therefore, Xi believed that Hong Kong can no longer afford any 'foreign influence' in the city and declared that only patriots should govern the city. Xi's outlook shows that Mainland China asserts that Hong Kong is under Beijing's full jurisdiction as opposed to the youths who believe that Hong Kong has full autonomy or rather should be given full autonomy to govern itself.

4.2   Youth Collective Activism Rejecting Chinese Identity after the Implementation of NNSL

Since the NNSL has banned protests, youths have shifted to different means of collective activism in place of physical social protests. Even with the risk of being detained, youths have insisted on continuous collective activism to uphold their identity against Chinese identity. Based on the conceptual framework, the youth social movement in Hong Kong went through a mainstream phase where they projected social categorization by dividing Hongkonger's characteristics against mainland Chinese's characteristics

establishing an 'us' versus 'they' identity. The following section provides the findings gathered on how the rejection of Chinese identity through social movements represents the consolidation of Hongkonger's identity through the lens of the youth.

Firstly, Hong Kong youths have acknowledged that the use of collective activism through online protests and civil disobedience after the implementation of NNSL has marked a transition in the way youths protest. Social media protests have provided space to express youths' rejection of Chinese identity. More significantly, commitment to the city's autonomy and way of life is constantly being upheld. This new method has brought together people of different backgrounds, ages and political stances who echo the same desire and goals. This is represented through the narratives alluded by the respondents where they insist that collective activism through online platforms have increased the volume of participation which showcases anxiety over the encroachment of mainland China's influence in Hong Kong's domestic affairs. Respondents stated that although the NNSL has ended their traditional way of protesting on the streets, instead it has sparked increased youth participation in online activism, mainly due to the anonymity factor. Subsequently, this has helped increase the intensity of projecting Hongkonger's identity against an imposed mainland China identity. Particularly, there is more intensity in emphasizing the importance of the *One Country, Two Systems* principle as a method to govern Hong Kong. As elaborated earlier, this principle is considered the cornerstone of Hong Kong's rather unique identity and that projecting it collectively through an intense online campaign is designed to rattle China's political imposition on Hong Kong. One respondent was concerned that the projection of this principle through online platforms could possibly trigger a more oppressive reaction by China. The fear is that internet users in Hong Kong and any form of social movements would be banned by mainland China if the situation persists.

The implementation of NNSL has managed to deter the visibility of Hongkonger's collective feelings against mainland China from the global community. Respondents believed that physical social movements replaced with online movements propagates awareness, propagandas and sentiments of youth rejection against mainland China, therefore successfully maintaining intensity and visibility of Hongkonger's exclusive identity. Moving on, the respondents also observed that protesting through different

means provides an alternative means to project Hongkonger's distinct identity to the global community. In doing so, it highlights Hongkonger's identity as unique and being oppressed by mainland China's interferences. Respondents opined that a wider projection of Hongkonger's identity would invite the global community to pressure China to stop its encroachment over Hongkong.

At the same time, respondents believe that the online protests allow for augmentation of the idea of "us" versus "they" where Hongkongers are free to reject oppressive laws in comparison to mainland Chinese where the rule of law is adhered strictly as reaction from authorities is highly feared. Respondents remarked although they faced risks of being detained by protesting, it demonstrates their commitment in protecting the city's autonomy and way of life. Through online campaigns, they are able to share information on the latest actions by mainland China and retaliate, despite the Hong Kong government heavily censoring online contents. Youths also pointed out that the usage of social media platforms such as X (formerly known as twitter), Instagram and Telegram enables them to share their message, images, videos of previous protests as well as police brutality and at the same time provides them a space to strategize their reactions online. Not only that, youths have also shown that they are able to underscore their messages with the usage of innovative and creative tactics through online platforms in order to resist repression and censorships. They emphasized that this method enables the amplification of their rejection against mainland China and helps them in projecting the Hongkonger's identity globally especially when internet content is accessible throughout the globe albeit with some form of censorship.

Civil disobedience also plays a vital role in protesting and projecting Hongkonger's identity. One of the respondents stated that "*Not directly following Hong Kong's law does not necessarily mean we are breaking the law. We just want to show that China can't never control us as the people of Hong Kong.*". This sentiment is shared by all respondents where they view civil disobedience as an instrument to show rejection of the authorities in Hong Kong and mainland China. When asked how this contributed to consolidating Hongkonger's identity, all respondents believed that Hongkongers value autonomy and freedom of speech, and by persistently demonstrating these values would enhance the projection of Hongkonger exclusive identity.

5.   Discussion

Throughout the series of protests leading to the implementation of NNSL, Hong Kong's youth social movements have been significant in projecting the city state's identity as a distinct and separate entity from mainland China, by using the narrative of 'us' versus 'they'. These social movements directly amplified Hong Kong's unique culture, history and way of life as part of the city state's identity. More importantly, this is not to say that Hongkonger's identity was vague between 2014 and 2020, rather, respondents were convinced that consistently projecting the idea of a distinct identity against mainland China has grounded the position of Hongkonger's identity with a set of standardized norms and values. More importantly, they believe that collectively, youth protests act as a deterrent mechanism against mainland China's increasing encroachment in domestic affairs.

Overall, this study has highlighted the complex nature of Hongkonger's identity from the lens of youths who were involved in the protests between 2014 and 2020 and how this distinct identity is prominently shaped by a variety of factors including values, principles, cultural practices and the opposition to the mainland Chinese government particularly. This has intensified Hongkonger's projection of Hongkongers 'us' identity against mainland China's 'they' identity. The findings of this study suggest that the series of protests in Hong Kong are not merely about opposing the increasing encroachment of mainland China in the city, but also extend to the discourse of identity. Apart from other segment of society, youths have played a role in representing the will of Hongkonger's demand for greater autonomy. The retaliation of mainland China against the protests is a testimony of how youths have managed to threaten the political and social position of mainland Chinese authorities in the city.

The study's findings suggest that democracy and freedom of speech are central to the identity of many Hongkongers, which serves as fundamental values that shape their way of life, sense of self-expression and expression of identity. This belief is rooted in the city's history, where Hong Kong citizens have been fighting for their rights and freedoms since the days of British colonial rule. In present day, with *One Country, Two Systems* as a governing principle, the preservation of democracy and freedom of speech are considered critical aspects of Hong Kong's identity. Hongkongers feel that they are being oppressed by Beijing, and their identity is a direct response to this oppression. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the recent

pro-democracy protests are examples of how youths showed that they are fighting for democracy, identity as well as autonomy.

Respondents have expressed a strong belief in the importance of democracy, freedom of speech, preservation of civil liberties, cultural differences and anti-Chinese sentiments that illustrates the complexity of Hong Kong's identity. Through their experiences of living in a democratic city, the youths have grown accustomed to democratic values, freedom of speech, and access to uncensored information, which they believed were under threat from increasing encroachment of mainland China on Hong Kong's political system. Interviewed youth activists in Hong Kong view social movements as a crucial instrument to consolidate Hong Kong's identity, with the theme of freedom being a central idea. Youth respondents also believed that their persistence in rejecting the 'they' identity is a symbol of resistance against authoritarianism and the erosion of civil liberties. In fact, they opined that their consistent efforts have further embedded the values of Hongkongers locally and internationally.

They believe that the concept of 'us' is amplified through the consistency of protesting regardless of the type of platform. The central idea of Hong Kong's youth social movements revolves around the discourse of identity which fits Aberle's (1996) definition of reformative new social movements whereby the demand for change is limited to the system that affects Hong Kong's identity and affects everyone as a community in the city state.

Although NNSL has managed to terminate physical social protest, youths have not lost their will to project the 'us' identity. Findings suggest that collective activism through physical or online campaigns and civil disobedience has managed to spark relevant discussions about autonomy, freedom and democracy in the region. The implementation of NNSL is testimony that the series of youth protests did put some political pressure on mainland China. Although NNSL is used as an instrument to halt any form of physical social protests and to further deter the gap between Hong Kong and mainland China, youths believe that NNSL is just another challenge for them to adapt and adopt different collective means to protests. As a result of their persistence, it has completely changed how social movements in Hong Kong would likely proceed in the near future.

6.   Conclusion

Social movements in Hong Kong have undergone various stages of development, including emergence, coalescence, and bureaucratization phases in recent years. As noted by Christensen (1979), in the long run, social movements may decline due to a range of factors. Overall, despite the NNSL's introduction as a deterrent against the series of protests in Hong Kong, the decline of street protests has led to the emergence of alternative means of mobilizing collective activism. This study shows that the decline of youth's physical social protests in Hong Kong has led to an alternative collective activism through social media activism and collective activism that reinforces the sense of "we" versus "they". This phenomenon reflects the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which highlights the formation of satisfied social identity in contrast to dissatisfied identity. For instance, findings reveal that young activists in Hong Kong define their identity by prioritizing values such as autonomy, freedom of speech, and democracy. These represent Hong Kong's civic values against state-constructed national values of mainland China. This situation has created competing identities that is reinforced through civil disobedience, physical and online campaigns, mainly projecting the exclusivity of Hong Kong's identity.

The emergence of new types of social movements is a testimony to the persistence of youths in consolidating Hong Kong's identity and rejecting mainland China's encroachment in the city's social and political affairs. Due to the restrictions of NNSL, currently, there are no prominent groups advocating for Hong Kong's autonomy. The infamous trial of 'Hong Kong 47' in 2021 which consisted of pro-democracy campaigners who protested against mainland China did embed fear amongst youth in participating in resistance movements. The arrested pro-democracy figures were convicted of conspiracy and were found guilty under the NNSL (Yeung, Gan and Lau, 2024). Despite this, youths' involvement in the protests did establish a continued legacy in instilling their willingness to individually advocate for Hong Kong's autonomous status. For example, through the usage of alternative platform, mainly social media, Nathan Law, Francis Hui and Sunny Cheung are consistently vocal about their dissatisfaction over the actions of mainland China in Hong Kong. While the future of Hong Kong is predictable with the One Country, Two Systems principle set to end in 2047, it is unclear the extent to which Hongkonger's identity will prevail, more so

with youth social movements that might face increasing censorships from China in the near future.

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Appendix

Semi structured questions distributed to the respondents:

Disclaimer: Your participation in this study in completely voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, please be aware that you are allowed to withdraw from this survey at any point. It is with most regard that your views and opinions are very important and will be of high value for this research.

Introduction

In recent years, The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) or commonly referred to as Hong Kong has seen the mobilization of youth social movement. Hong Kong has seen massive protests in 2014 Umbrella Movement, 2017 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest and 2020 Protest against the implementation of NNSL. The central narrative brought upon the youth in justifying their mobilization of social protests is to reject mainland China's increasing assertion of its policies and control over the city-state's governance and identity, which is perceived as violating the autonomy that was promised until 2047. Additionally, as a result, there is a strengthening of the identification of Hongkonger's exclusive identity as well a larger gap in the understanding of nationalism between mainland China and Hong Kong. In addition, after the introduction of the New National Security Law (NNSL) in 2020, physical social protests were banned and as a result, youths have resorted to a new interpretation of mobilizing youth protest via neo-collective activism.

The purpose of this study is to examine **youth social movements** and **the consolidation of Hongkonger's distinct identity** before and after the introduction of the New National Security Law (NNSL)

Below some of the keywords and their meaning used.

Keywords	Meaning
New National Security Law (NNSL)	Law that established four particular crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organization. Any form of actions including, open speech, or mobilization of protest to promote Hong Kong's secession from China are considered as crime.
Hongkonger's identity	An identity that replaces Chinese nationalism that is based on race and ethnicity. Moreover, the terminology focuses on the nature of interaction between Hong Kong and China by embracing democratic values
New form of collective activism	An approach of mobilizing protest through unconventional approaches by replacing physical protests.
"we" identity	A term used by Hongkonger's to distinctly disassociate themselves from mainland Chinese.
"they" identity	Mainland Chinese nationalism and identity that is based on race and ethnicity, loyalty towards the China Communist Party (CCP)

1. As youth who were once involved in the any of the three protests, what is Hongkonger's identity?

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2. What is your view and perception in "One Country Two Systems" and its relation to Hongkonger's identity?

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3. What is your opinion on the treatment of mainland China towards the "One Country, Two Systems" principle?

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    _____
    _____

4. How do the youths propagate Hongkonger's identity after the introduction of NNSL?

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5. What are the implications of NNSL in the context of protest?

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6. Why do youths persist on mobilizing protest through new methods (online collectivism) as an approach even though there are repercussions after the introduction of NNSL?

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    _____

7. The youth are forced to abandon the classical approach of protesting through social movement under the NNSL. How does the new collective activism consolidate Hongkonger's identity particularly in projecting 'us' versus 'they' identity?

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