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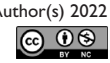

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Enacting cross-platform (buy/boy)cotts: Yellow Economic Circle and the new citizen-consumer politics in Hong Kong

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Abstract

While existing studies assert that citizens actively use digital media to exert their political agency, the various roles and impacts of digital media should be further unpacked. Building on the notions of 'digital democratic affordance' and 'cross-platform play', this article uniquely theorises political consumerism as a multi-scalar mode of human–non-human interactions. The concept of *multi-scalar cross-platform affordances* is formulated to demonstrate how different digital platforms – large or small, corporate or amateur, global or local – co-constitute an environment in which citizens are progressively channelled to engage in multiple platforms, reinvent them in concert with one another and participate in political consumption across time and space. In the case of the Yellow Economic Circle, against the backdrop of Hong Kong's 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement, we examine such cross-platform dynamics and their multi-scalar enactment of everyday political consumption practices across four stages: deliberation, crowdsourcing, materialisation and habituation.

Keywords

Anti-ELAB movement, boycott, buycott, consumption, cross-platform affordances, digital platforms, Hong Kong, multi-scalar enactment, political consumerism, Yellow Economic Circle

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Introduction

There have been ongoing debates on how digital media have accelerated the 'new politics', 'new social movements', 'new digital democracy initiatives' and 'e-democracy' (Chan et al., 2017; Deseriis, 2021; Pun et al., 2017). In the cases of the Arab Spring in the 2011 Egyptian revolution (Azer et al., 2019), the Taiwanese Sunflower Movement political protest in 2014 (Tsatsou, 2018), Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement (Agur and Frisch, 2019; Cheng and Chan, 2017) and the ongoing anti-globalisation protests (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002), political participation was arguably driven by citizens' active expressions of individual identity, choices, rights or interests. The predominantly Western social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter serve as a privatisation or individualisation of the political sphere (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019: 1989).

However, we contend that digital media are *not* simply passive tools for citizens to engage in political activities and to exert their agency. The roles, affordances and impacts of various types of digital and social media, as Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019) rightfully argue, have to be further unpacked. This article uniquely resituates the analysis of political consumerism in Hong Kong as a multi-scalar mode of human–non-human interactions in the debates about political participation and digital platform affordances. Displacing the citizen-consumer from the centre of analytical attention in existing scholarship on political consumption (Clarke et al., 2007), we focus on digital platform affordances. This means that rather than looking at how citizens actively engage in political consumerism through digital platforms, we explore how the various features and affordances of different digital platforms – large or small, corporate or amateur, global or local – co-constitute an environment in which citizens are progressively channelled to engage with multiple platforms, reinvent them in concert with one another and subsequently participate in political consumption.

This much-needed study of cross-platform affordances in a non-Western context addresses three theoretical and empirical gaps: (1) how the analysis of digital platform affordances typically adopts a separatist logic and is bounded within one single platform, rather than considering the dynamics and exchanges across platforms; (2) how existing research on digital platform affordances primarily focuses on the large platforms developed by Western, global tech companies, particularly social media platforms (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), rather than small, non-Western, local platforms that are crowdsourced and developed by amateurs (e.g. Lane et al., 2019; Plantin, 2015); and (3) although there are numerous studies of non-social media digital platforms out there, including those on ride-hailing applications (Chan and Kwok, 2021), food delivery applications (Van Doorn, 2017), property management applications (Van Doorn, 2020), gaming applications (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019) and dating applications (Chan, 2018), most relate to topics such as labour exploitation, economic insecurity and citizenship, gamification and monetisation, and gender/sexual/cultural identity construction, but not political participation.

In the following, we examine how multiple digital platforms afford and enact everyday political consumption practices during and after Hong Kong's 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement. We first review the divergent manifestations of political participation in the digital sphere and their intricate mechanisms. While previous studies have primarily focused on how 'the affordances of

digital democracy can increase participation, contributing to democratis[ing] a political system' (Deseriis, 2021: 2454), this study aims to provide a more comprehensive conceptual framework grounded on the contextualised empirical practices, also to map the holistic systems of platform affordances across social and non-social media platforms. In particular, we build on the notions of 'digital democratic affordance' (Dahlberg, 2011) and 'cross-platform play' (Lu and Steele, 2019) to formulate our conception of *multi-scalar cross-platform affordances*, in which we draw attention to the temporality and spatiality of social and digital media (Neumayer et al., 2019), the cross-platform interactions, and their potential, actual and lingering impacts across time and space (Deseriis, 2021). Thereafter, we introduce political consumerism as a unique strategy for political resistance, its analytical foci, and conceptual and empirical gaps in the existing scholarship. Finally, in our case study of the Yellow Economic Circle, against the backdrop of Hong Kong's 2019 Anti-ELAB movement, we discuss the features, cross-platform dynamics and multi-scalar affordances of different types of digital platforms in advancing political consumerism across four stages (deliberation, crowdsourcing, materialisation and habituation).

Who/what affords political participation? From decentralised digital networks to digital democratic affordances to cross-platform affordances

Digital media have the potential to create a digital 'public sphere' in which critical debates on any social or political issues can openly take place (Miller, 2020). In the digitally enabled social movements, activist groups and organisations often act in coalition with other groups, forming decentralised, diffused, yet autonomous 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2003). In the absence of central coordinators, individual citizens draw on the social media–enabled 'collective action repertoires' (voluntarily contributed informational goods for public use) and partake in 'personalised collective actions' without formal membership procedures and incentives (Tsatsou, 2018: 3). However, more recent studies also highlight that, rather than enabling rhetorical 'leaderless' political participation, the decentralised digital network gives rise to 'countless informal leaders who collaborated with one another through both online and face-to-face interactions brokered its decentralised, polycentric and networked structure' (Cheng and Chan, 2017: 234).

In the case of Hong Kong, while a strong tradition of radical protests is absent, the first experimentation in online political participation during the 2014 Umbrella Movement provided younger citizens 'more motivation, confidence, and opportunities to engage in traditional forms of political participation offline' subsequently (Chan et al., 2017: 2016). In Lee and Chan's (2016) onsite survey regarding Umbrella Movement protesters, four types of digital media activities – online expression, online debates, online explanatory activities and mobile communication – were all positively related to their degree of offline involvement. In particular, Hong Kong's social media platforms had become an 'insurgent public sphere' in the protest movement (Lee et al., 2015: 348) and 'essential parts of "self-mobilisation processes" in which protest movements inspire new contestations in public discourse' (Agur and Frisch, 2019: 2). The rise of alternative media also plays a significant role in continuously accelerating pro-democracy debates

and a pro-protest attitude (Shen et al., 2020). Many Hong Kong citizens acquired political information from Internet alternative media, via social media (Lee, 2018). Even the traditionally apolitical digital spaces, such as family and school alumni chat groups, were increasingly politicised by 'robust and relationship-straining debates' (Agur and Frisch, 2019: 8).

Research on digitally enabled social movements has specifically underlined the role of digital affordances in facilitating various political practices. While Davis and Chouinard (2017) refer to affordances as 'the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects' (p. 1), Deseriis is more specific in proposing that affordances, different from *features* or *functionalities*, concern what kinds of actions a function enables users to take, meanwhile thwarting other actions. This makes affordances 'essentially a sociotechnical concept', which concerns 'the relationship between such properties and their manifold social uses' (Deseriis, 2021: 245). Deseriis further builds on the term 'digital democratic affordance' introduced by Lincoln Dahlberg (2011) to describe how digital affordances support different democratic theories and practices, including liberal-individualism, political deliberation, organisation of counter-publics and creation of digital commons.

Among the existing literature on digital democratic affordance, mainstream social media platforms have taken prevalence in the corpus of research (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2012; Thorson, 2014). Limited attention has been paid to *non-mainstream social media*, with the exception of the location-based anonymous mobile application Yik Yak in the United States (Lane et al., 2019). Furthermore, the affordances of *non-social media platforms* in facilitating political participation, especially platforms that are crowdsourced or developed by amateurs, are under-researched. A noteworthy exception, relevant to our analysis, is the study on the participatory radiation mapping following the Fukushima Daiichi disaster (Plantin, 2015). The lack of official information concerning the nuclear fallout prompted some amateur citizens to develop online web-based mapping, primarily based on Google Maps, in an attempt to locate the radiation. The affordances of mapping platforms, including queries towards a mapping application programming interface (API), merging of third-party data and publication online, facilitated a crowdsourced 'mapping mashup' through participatory data extraction and data aggregation 'to create a completely new application or service' that renegotiates the government–public power relation in regard to the access and distribution of information (Plantin, 2015: 905). This case demonstrates the agency of the public in capitalising on existing digital infrastructures and open-access data to support political functions that are not necessarily designated by those infrastructures. It foregrounds the digital democratic affordances of non-mainstream, non-corporate and participatory platforms, which are often missing in this area of research.

In addition to the aforementioned academic bias, some researchers have also noted that the prevalent single-platform analyses ignore the fact that individuals are indeed networked and politically engaged on multiple platforms *simultaneously*. Hence, cross-platform studies on, for example, the 'black oral culture' on Twitter and Vine (Lu and Steele, 2019), and cross-cutting political talk on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), inspire us to look at how 'cross-platform play' (Lu and

Steele, 2019) influences users' political actions and potentially overcomes the limitations of a single platform's affordances. Zelenkauskaite (2017), however, argues that the parameters of what platform architectures enable the users to do are still very much dictated by media companies, who have little incentive to favour users' benefit. In light of this hierarchical structure of popular cross-platform media, the interplay between mainstream and non-mainstream, corporate and amateur/crowdsourced 'mashup' platforms found in Hong Kong's Yellow Economic Circle movement make an intriguing empirical case study, especially in a world with a rising tech-savvy counter-public.

Political consumerism as a new strategy for political resistance

Beyond the dichotomy of consumption and civic engagement, political consumption is coupled with a neo-liberal vision that 'the marketplace is the most efficient and effective arbiter of social values' (Thompson, 2011: 139), signifying a shift from 'formal politics to consumer politics' (Simon, 2011: 147). Rather than expressing their political views and demands through the conventional electoral systems, political institutions and organised political movements as citizens, individuals exercise their political power 'through their wallets' and their role as consumers. They use strategies such as buycotts and boycotts to enact certain politicised meanings and moralistically infused citizenship ideals. This 'shopping for change' ethos personifies what Cohen (2003) has coined the citizen-consumer – an autonomous social actor who makes use of marketplace resources to achieve political goals.

Political consumption is manifested in the cases of Fair Trade™ and ethical trade initiatives in the Euro-American context, with the former highlighting the Global North consumers' increasing awareness of the exploitative labour conditions in mainstream production and distribution networks, whereas the latter focuses on the consumer-driven demand for more ethical and responsible forms of products and services (Clarke et al., 2007: 584). The spirit of political consumerism also challenges the predominant economistic theorisations of consumerism as being utterly colonised by marketing, advertising and materialism. Thompson (2011) argues that different ideological legacies, socio-cultural conditions, socio-economic power structures and the interplay among multiple stakeholders reproduce and mobilise various logics and outcomes of political consumerism (p. 140). Political consumerism can achieve divergent forms of resistance against the global 'McDonaldizing' force, which includes the standardisation of products, deskilling of workers, and social and ecological degradation (Ulver-Sneistrup et al., 2011). It can also facilitate emotionally rewarding social relationships, with material goods functioning as props (Thompson, 2011: 142) or as a practical means to extend love, devotion, and care to significant others (Miller, 1998).

However, amid the capitalist globalisation and rampant neoliberalism, the active appropriation of the commercial marketplace as a potent site for political action and civic engagement is also a 'compensatory response to the broader trajectories of neo-liberal policies, which have undermined key foundations of collective identification . . . that formerly enabled citizens to organise as political blocs' (Thompson, 2011: 140). It sees

the surge of ethical and political consumerism as problematic, as it individualises the civic, public culture (Simon, 2011: 148), often lacks a collective dimension, compromises the neoliberal logic and also hollows out the responsibilities and accountabilities of nation-states (Clarke et al., 2007: 586). The existing scholarship on fair-trade primarily focuses on consumers as the key drivers in the growth of ethical and political consumption practices, with the impact of and dynamics among other human (e.g. states, corporations and international institutions) and non-human agents (e.g. digital platforms and the point-of-sales physical environment) being under-researched (Clarke et al., 2007: 585–586). Furthermore, to what extent citizen-consumers consciously express existing commitments to various ethical and political projects through consumption practices, and whether they recognise themselves as consumers pursuing specific pragmatic and non-political purposes while engaging in political consumerism, are in question. As manifested in the emergence of the Yellow Economic Circle during Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB movement, we uniquely conceptualise political consumerism as a routinised practice and everyday tactic, an articulation of collective action repertoires of buycott/boycott and a vehicle for 'integrating discursive and symbolic resources and [for] maintaining solidarity' (Lee and Fong, 2021: 14). This context-specific case of political consumerism also reveals that, under the city's changing socio-political environment, Hong Kong movement supporters increasingly forgo traditional forms of political activism to avoid challenging China's legitimacy (Zhang, 2015).

Contextualising political consumerism in Hong Kong: the 2019–2020 Anti-ELAB movement

After more than a century of British colonisation, Hong Kong was returned to China as a special administrative region in 1997. The city has long had a troubled identification with the Chinese one-party leadership, whose political ideology is seen as incompatible with Hong Kong's perceived core values of democracy, rule of law and civil liberties (Ku, 2019). On 16 June 2019, 2 million people – almost one-third of the city's population – rallied in the largest demonstration in Hong Kong's history (BBC News, 2019) in opposition to the extradition bill that raised serious concerns over the loss of autonomy. The mass demonstrations swiftly spiralled into a prolonged democratic struggle against Chinese communist rule.

The Anti-ELAB movement was characterised by its leaderless, decentralised, spontaneous and anonymous mobilisation. Throughout the movement, no organisation or figure could command influence over the decisions made by protestors (Lee et al., 2019). However, a strong sense of solidarity was built, based on mutual respect for different views, which effectively engendered a movement with a diverse social base and repertoires (Chung, 2020: 59). Today, following the implementation of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020, demonstrations have vanished from the streets and freedom of speech has arguably been curtailed (see Davidson, 2021). Among the heterogeneous practices developed during the movement, the *Yellow Economic Circle* remains an important resistance strategy and solidarity network in the current political climate.

Political consumption is not entirely new to Hong Kong. After the police clearance of the occupation sites during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, some pro-democracy

protesters had already improvised a new form of protest in the name of 'shopping' – they self-organised online to walk in groups pretending to shop and expressed their discontent by chanting 'I want shopping!' around the working-class neighbourhoods (Ting, 2020: 363). Wong et al. (2021) also observe that these protesters had buycotted and boycotted individual businesses based on their political stance on the occupy movement. But it was not until the Anti-ELAB movement that they systematically buycotted pro-democracy ('yellow') restaurants and merchants, and boycotted pro-government and police-supporting ('blue') ones. As a loosely defined label,[1] 'yellow' businesses are sometimes referred to as 'good-conscience' shops, or as being run by 'true Hong Kongers', reflecting the moral underpinning and centrality of a local collective identity in the Anti-ELAB movement. This corresponds to Wong et al.'s (2021) qualitative research on the Yellow Economic Circle, which asserts that people who participate in buycott and boycott generally express resistance to the Hong Kong–China economic integration, endorsement of the Hong Kong identity and rejection of the Chinese one.

The Yellow Economic Circle was developed with the aims to put the pro-government camp under economic pressure, maximise financial support for the movement and, some even suggested, to develop an autonomous local economy opposing Chinese monopoly in the long run.[2] From September 2019 to January 2020, over 98% of protestors had buycotted yellow shops and boycotted blue ones, eclipsing all other means of political participation (Chung, 2020: 61). The Yellow Economic Circle, now referred to by Hong Kongers as the 'Yellow Circle', expanded to a wider scope of everyday choice in dining, shopping, media and news outlets, transportation, payment methods, services, artists and brands. With the demobilisation of the Anti-ELAB movement under the National Security Law, the Yellow Circle serves as a crucial vehicle for maintaining solidarity ties and everyday political engagement in an increasingly repressive political environment (Forno, 2019).

Methodology

Scholars assert that the Reddit-like local online forum LIHKG was a leading digital platform for organising demonstrations and discussing movement tactics and discourses, as well as maintaining spirit among protestors in the Anti-ELAB movement (Kow et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). The centrality of LIHKG in the formation of the discourses of political consumerism renders it the primary source for our analysis. A close reading of selected LIHKG threads (see Table 1) between 2019 and 2021 advances our understanding of the discursive construction of political consumerism as a feasible and effective counter-cultural/political strategy among Hong Kong citizens. To further trace how a more systematic circle of yellow businesses in society is brainstormed, materialised, enacted and habituated within and without LIHKG, we extend the discourse analysis of LIHKG to case studies of other local, small, amateur and emerging platforms, in addition to the subsequent social events. We analyse the multi-scalar, cross-platform affordances and interactions, mostly neglected in previous research, in the formation of the Yellow Economic Circle across four different stages, including deliberation, crowdsourcing, materialisation and habituation.

Rooted in social psychology and linguistics, discourse analysis focuses on how social categories, knowledge and relations are shaped by discourse (Hodges et al., 2008). A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for representing a particular kind of knowledge about a subject (Hall, 2019). This research method explores how language functions, creates meanings in which people understand the social reality and constructs social practices (Tonkiss, 2004). In particular, it examines the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used (Paltridge, 2012) and is particularly useful in investigating how different factors connect with each other to form a web of meanings (Broussard, 2009). In that sense, language is not simply a medium for communicating information, but a domain where people's knowledge of the social world is actively shaped (Tonkiss, 2004).

In this study, we explore how the ideas of political consumerism are represented within online public discourses and co-constitute citizen-consumers' political subjectivity, political intention, immediate follow-up actions and long-term practices. Through analysing how specific digital features afford an environment where citizens more freely adopt discursive appropriation and strategise alternative political actions under an increasingly suppressive political environment, we demonstrate how the concept is socially constructed, deliberated, disseminated, materialised and practically enacted in and through multiple digital platforms.[3]

Data analysis

Online forum LIHKG facilitates deliberation

LIHKG was a leading platform for the Anti-ELAB movement supporters to share information, discuss tactics and maintain a spirit of resistance (Yeo, 2019), wherein the ideas of boycott and buycott were first discussed, debated and incubated. On 12 June 2019, following the outbreak of the Anti-ELAB protests, an LIHKG (2019a) user created a boycott list, gaining over 4500 upvotes. In the following 43 pages of comments, netizens continued to expand the list with screen captures of Facebook and Instagram posts as supporting evidence. The same user then invited others to contribute to the list in a Google spreadsheet (LIHKG, 2019b). This initiative was further accelerated by an incident ('2019 Yuen Long Attack') on 21 July 2019, when an armed mob of triad members indiscriminately attacked and injured 45 metro passengers in Yuen Long metro station, including protesters, journalists and lawmakers returning from a demonstration (Kuo and Yu, 2019). On the same day, a post on LIHKG (2019d) encouraged people to boycott triad-owned shops and proposed to compile a list of 'good-conscience' businesses. On 6 August 2019, another user announced the launch of a 'Conscience Economic Circle', sharing a Google 'My Map' and a Google Form for netizens to identify yellow businesses (LIHKG, 2019e). This marked the beginning of an expansive discussion on developing the Yellow Economic Circle in support of the movement.

A recent randomised telephone survey with Hong Kong residents ($n = 817$) in August 2020 and a qualitative analysis of threads and comments in LIHKG from June 2019 to January 2020 ($n = 53{,}729$), both conducted by Lee and Fong (2021), empirically validate

Table 1. LIHKG threads.

Date	Code	Title of LIHKG thread (translation)	Title of LIHKG thread (in Chinese)	Link
13 June 2019	2019a	Permanent boycott list	永久罷食/ 抵制餐廳名單	https://lihkg.com/thread/1215706/page/1
13 June 2019	2019b	Permanent boycott list (please add to the list)	永久罷食/ 抵制餐廳List（靠大家幫手add入去）	https://lihkg.com/thread/1215985/page/1
30 June 2019	2019c	Strongly advise LIHKG to show number of (i-)votes after (i-)voting	強烈建議連登正負評係投完先顯示	https://lihkg.com/thread/1267819/page/1
21 July 2019	2019d	[Desert Yuen Long] Instead of starting a revolution, recognise the Triad Economic Circle and start an economic boycott	【冰河元朗】勿搞光復 認清鄉黑經濟圈 改經濟制裁	https://lihkg.com/thread/1343810/page/1
6 August 2019	2019e	The official launch of the Hong Kong Conscience Economic Circle ('peaceful' protestors welcome)	香港良心經濟圈，正式成立 (和非理進場)	https://lihkg.com/thread/1421924/page/1
7 August 2019	2019f	LIHKG updates (2019-08-07)	LIHKG 更新公告 (2019-08-07)	https://lihkg.com/thread/1424529/page/1
7 August 2019	2019g	Responding to users' feedback on the (i-)voting system and other enquiries	回應會員對本討論區評分系統及對管理團隊的各種查詢	https://lihkg.com/thread/1424552/page/1
19 October 2019	2019h	Please spread: Another fake yellow shop (on the yellow chart)	手足傳開 又一間偽黃店（上左黃店榜）	https://lihkg.com/thread/1663559/page/1
24 October 2019	2019i	Establish a Yellow Economic Circle	建立黃色經濟圈	https://lihkg.com/thread/1671807/page/1
26 November 2019	2019j	Please develop a 'Real Yellow Economic Circle'	請發展「真點黃色經濟圈」	https://lihkg.com/thread/1757502/page/1
27 November 2019	2019k	I am a Call4Van driver. I have something to say	我係一個Call4Van貨Van司機 有野想同大家講	https://lihkg.com/thread/1758983/page/1
29 November 2019	2019l	Analysing the statistics of LIHKG users' discussion on 'empty votes'	分析 LIHKG 用戶對「白票」討論的數據	https://lihkg.com/thread/1762487/page/1
5 May 2020	2020a	[Equip your mind] Anyone really know what 'human blood steamed bun' is?	【心態武裝】大家有冇認真諗過咩係人血饅頭？	https://lihkg.com/thread/2002854/page/1
17 May 2020	2020b	I support militant protest originally	本身我係支持勇武抗爭的	https://lihkg.com/thread/2020000/page/1
20 May 2020	2020c	Bloomberg: YEC is worth hundreds of billions – way more than we think	Bloomberg: 黃色經濟圈值千億 比想像中大好多	https://lihkg.com/thread/2025992/page/1
30 June 2020	2020d	Chapman To: A yellow shop wants to 'withdraw' YEC – how do we handle this technically?	杜汶澤：一間黃店話要退出黃色經濟圈，技術上究竟係點處理？	https://lihkg.com/thread/2086609/page/1
13 September 2020	2020e	I realise delivery platforms is a dead end	我發現外賣平台只係一個死局 好快收皮	https://lihkg.com/thread/2200736/page/1
10 October 2020	2020f	Take consumerism as resistance?	幫襯黃店就當抗爭？	https://lihkg.com/thread/2237389/page/1
25 November 2020	2020g	About the Mee app . . .	其實Mee 個app呢. . .	https://lihkg.com/thread/2300156/page/1
5 December 2020	2020h	Many 'yellow shops' are crying for help	好多「黃店」叫哂救命	https://lihkg.com/thread/2312467/page/1
20 December 2020	2020i	Why isn't anyone talking about 'taking consumerism as resistance'?	「食黃店當抗爭」都冇人講？	https://lihkg.com/thread/2333611/page/1
6 January 2021	2021a	Soon some of those people will no longer mock others for 'taking consumerism as resistance'	某d人好快唔使再笑「 幫襯黃店當抗爭」	https://lihkg.com/thread/2354918/page/1
23 February 2021	2021b	Hong Kong's most militant battle was on 11.18 – the day of the siege of HKPolyU. Think twice about whether the District Council Election and dining at 'yellow' restaurants have led to an indifference to street protest!	香港歷史上最勇武抗爭嘅一天，係1118，全城救理大的一天，自己諗清楚係咪因為區選/食黃店搞到冇人上街	https://lihkg.com/thread/2419463/page/1
1 May 2021	2021c	The Mee app has lots of bugs!	隻Mee App 好多BUG！	https://lihkg.com/thread/2511591/page/1
23 May 2021	2021d	Is it really true that all 'LIHKG boys' work in yellow businesses and never work for blue ones?	其實係咪所有連登仔都係喺黃店打工，未試過幫藍店賺錢？	https://lihkg.com/thread/2543554/page/1
13 June 2021	2021e	Up until this stage, is it still meaningful to support YEC?	其實去到而家咁，仲堅持黃色經濟圈仲有冇意義?	https://lihkg.com/thread/2573032/page/1

our theoretical propositions. The survey shows that there is a positive correlation between social media use for public affairs information gathering and discussions and Hong Kongers' attitudes to and engagement in political consumption, especially for those who were receptive to radicalism. The qualitative analysis also indicates that LIHKG's affordances made it highly effective in circulating the most popular ideas and predominant sentiments among the Anti-ELAB movement's supporters, rendering it a key platform for Hong Kong protesters to '[share] information, [suggest] actions, and [negotiate] protest tactics and norms', including political consumption (Lee and Fong, 2021: 5). Building on their study, we argue that the platform-specific digital affordances of LIHKG not only rendered a conducive space for political deliberation on political consumerism, but also incubated various multi-scalar strategies through a twofold process. Rather than enacting political consumerism directly, the online forum first serves as a common space for anonymous users to deliberate on the political consumerist initiative. Topics range from whether a business is 'yellow' or 'blue' to the objectives and operational logic of the Yellow Economic Circle, from the 'definition' of political consumerism to its legitimacy as a resistance strategy (see Table 1). Second, LIHKG ensures anonymous users a sense of safety to further formulate, disseminate and promote other 'yellow' initiatives, such as building yellow businesses lists, sharing yellow maps or applications and interacting with other yellow social media accounts. For instance, the activist group GearUp Hong Kong regularly publishes educational and strategy-related posts across Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and LIHKG (see LIHKG, 2020a, 2021d). These cross-platform interactions derived from LIHKG increase the exposure of these initiatives far beyond the personal networks of anonymous individuals.

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are said to easily produce online echo chambers, as their news feed algorithms and personalised interfaces tend to reinforce similar narratives, political leanings and attitudes while limiting diversity of perspectives (Cinelli et al., 2021). Distinct from these social networking sites, LIHKG operates on anonymity and a depersonalised interface (contents not being filtered by one's personalised network). Identified only by their usernames and serial numbers, members are free to create new threads, and threads are open for comments and for being upvoted or downvoted by other members. Threads that achieve more upvotes and comments are more likely to appear on the front page of the forum (Yeo, 2019). Users are no longer 'at the center of their own network [or] have constant access mainly to the materials circulating within their networks' (Lee et al., 2021: 4). Rather, LIHKG's features afford an egalitarian framing of political deliberation or a 'politics of the anonym' (Ranciere, 1992) in the sense that users are exposed to the ideas of anyone without any prior framing, such as gender, age, occupation or even previous experience in activism. Such digital democratic affordances create a digital commons through 'a decentralised, networked, open source intelligence' (Dahlberg, 2011: 863).

Although also operating on anonymity, the framing of political deliberation in LIHKG works differently from its Western counterpart, Reddit, due to its distinctive affordances and usage.[4] On LIHKG, there is a 'hot topics' page that renews frequently to enable visibility of threads based on popular response. In this way, 'almost no users could continually occupy the role of "top opinion leader" in the forum' (Lee et al., 2021: 9). Rather than being employed in the context of a political system, such as a ballot or party

referendum, this 'i-voting' feature served as 'a kind of non-binding opinion-seeking' poll during the Anti-ELAB movement that platform members and visitors could take as a reference when deciding their political actions, (Kow et al., 2020: 9), thus encouraging direct democracy (Deseriis, 2021: 2459).

Crowdsourced yellow maps enable participatory cartography

As a common space for political deliberation, LIHKG provides a breeding ground where users collectively revise methods and reinvent cross-platform tools to support its continuous operations. For instance, a combination of cross-platform features affords the crowdsourced mapping of yellow/blue businesses utilising other open-source data and platforms. As previously mentioned, citizens initially employed Google Form and Google Sheets to identify the political stance of businesses and consolidate individual political consumers' contributions. The collected datasets were then visualised in the existing Google Maps, a platform whose 'API [permits] third parties to add or overlay other data onto the Google base map, thus creating mapping "mashups"' (Plantin et al., 2018: 305). Users with the link to this 'My Map' (Google's customisable maps) can view the yellow/blue businesses marked on their Google Map. Very quickly, yellow mapping was developed into independent applications that followed logics and interfaces similar to a dining guide platform. Wolipay, a yellow mapping application that is still in use at the time of writing, contains filters for users to sort their search by the political label colour, business types, categories of cuisines and more, on a built-in Google Map. The application also directs users to other platforms, such as the OpenRice (a popular local dining guide platform), Instagram and Facebook pages of the businesses.

The juxtaposed affordances of these Web 2.0 devices – crowdsourcing, Google spreadsheets, mashups and visualisation software – enable the public to mobilise data for collective projects (Ruppert and Savage, 2011), such as crisis management (Givoni, 2016; Plantin, 2015), protest organisation (Cammaerts, 2015), and in this case, the cross-platform curation of multi-modal data for political consumption: a restaurant or a business could be identified as 'yellow' by its contribution to the movement (donation, employing protestors, sheltering protestors from tear gas, etc.); it could also be 'yellow' for its expression of support by displaying movement slogans, posters or artefacts at their store, voicing their condemnation of the government on social media, or allowing employees to go on strike. Sometimes, it could simply be word of mouth when someone overhears that its staff or employer has criticised the government. While the crowdsourced yellow mapping differs from the official and factual 'data extraction' and labelling systems adopted in the case of nuclear radiation mapping (Plantin, 2015), it syncs the features of various digital platforms (e.g. Google Maps, voting and commenting functions) to afford a democratic, transparent and participatory mapping system, effectively contributing to the subsequent materialisation of the Yellow Economic Circle. Most of these maps allow any user to report a new location with their reasons, and to display these reasons for others to consider. A Google Form is also available for the identified 'blue' businesses to justify themselves in cases of wrong labelling. Wolipay even has a yellow/blue voting function and a comment section under which customers can freely share their views.

The proliferation of the Web 2.0 devices provides amateur citizen-consumers with tools to generate, aggregate, consult and circulate the crowdsourced political information. The co-optation of Google Map API into independent applications can customise functions to the specific needs of political consumers. Wolipay, for instance, is *specifically* designed to facilitate the convenient use of political consumption and democratise the capacity of political cartography that sustains this very activity. While appropriating multiple platforms, such as Google Form, Google Maps and OpenRice, these applications bypass the parameters embedded in the infrastructural designs of these platforms. Here, the cross-platform affordances are enacted through citizen-platform (human–non-human) interactions, during which (tech-savvy) citizens can capitalise on open-source data, engage in sophisticated participatory mapping practices and rework the logic of crowdsourcing platforms for their own political ends. Such appropriation and combination of the features of multiple platforms give rise to a distinct digital democratic affordance – a kind of 'counter-mappings' of 'spaces not represented by official state agencies' manifest a specific knowledge power (Crampton and Krygier, 2006: 25) that constitutes a form of collective resistance, especially in an undemocratic political context. As the political consumerist cartographers intervene in the spatiality of the city through a coloured map (Li and Whitworth, 2021), they 'reject the authority claimed by normative maps uniquely to portray reality as it is, that is, with dispassion and objectivity' (Wood, 2006: 10). Yellow maps, ready to be materialised into consumption practices, stand as 'a manifesto for a set of beliefs about the world' (Harley, 1991: 13).

Service-based platforms materialises political consumption

While the yellow mapping applications offer the operational infrastructure of the Yellow Economic Circle, different types of service-based platforms that connect yellow customers and service providers are vital to materialise a peer-to-peer yellow economy. Examples of peer-to-peer services include food delivery (LingDuck), ride-hailing services (Call4Van, Busgo612), courier services (Hong Kong Speedie), coupon purchasing (HoKoGuide) and surveying consultation (Surver). At this stage, further cross-platform dynamics occur. For example, some of these platforms utilise Telegram (an instant messaging application, popular among Hong Kong protestors as it is perceived to have better encryption than similar applications), which is accessible to anyone, and allows the use of pseudonyms (Kow et al., 2020). A case-in-point is the peer-to-peer taxi-calling platform Yellowcab_hk, which uses the Telegram Bot API (third-party applications running inside Telegram) to automate the rider–driver matching process without requiring either party to provide personal information. Other district-based food delivery services also use Telegram Bot or WhatsApp Business API to connect customers, deliverers and restaurants.[5] The city-wide food delivery platform LingDuck, however, has its own application for customers to order a delivery or use their self-pick-up service. The platform does not process payments as many large delivery platforms do; rather, customers pay by cash or by Payme (a third-party payment platform operated by HSBC), depending on the restaurant.

With a range of different operational scales and running on various (sometimes mixed) digital platforms, these peer-to-peer platforms become non-human actants that facilitate

economic exchanges between 'like-minded' consumers and businesses. In comparison with the online forum LIHKG that offers a digital commons for deliberative exchanges about the Yellow Economic Circle, these service-based platforms directly connect different individuals with a shared political stance in a business activity. They *materialise* the idea of political consumerism in actual service rendering and monetary transactions, marking everyday consumption and business practices as partially politically motivated. However, most of these for-profit 'yellow' platforms do not label themselves as such; some were not even designed for political consumerism. For instance, Call4Van, a commercial cargo van service operating since 2013, has been labelled as 'yellow' since the 2014 Umbrella Movement as many of its drivers voluntarily delivered protest resources to the occupying sites, and some drivers also offered a free service on Telegram during the Anti-ELAB movement.[6] Even so, the drivers and customers of Call4Van are not all pro-democracy supporters, and their usage of the platform is not always politically motivated. A focus on digital democratic affordances allows us to see that the material properties of a platform do not necessitate democratic potential, but rather depend on its sociopolitical uses (Deseriis, 2021). While these service-based platforms afford the enactment of political consumerism, their commercial nature simultaneously blurs the line between political participation and consumption.

Consumer-oriented platforms incentivise and habituate political consumption

As a small local business like many other yellow platforms, Call4Van is unable to compete with the multinational corporations, Uber and the Chinese-invested company Gogovan (LIHKG, 2019k). Nonetheless, it still stands as an important local force against the market monopolisers.[7] The case of Call4Van exemplifies a common characteristic of many yellow businesses in Hong Kong and highlights another dimension of political consumerism: small local businesses' resistance against the forces of globalisation and Chinese monopoly in Hong Kong's consumer market. This calls for the need to create an economic incentive and a conducive consumer environment to keep money circulating within the yellow local economy and to prevent it from falling into the hands of 'red' (Chinese) businesses (see Note 2). This gave rise to a number of consumer-oriented platforms, such as the membership-based reward system Yellow Family HK, and the comprehensive dining guide Punish Mee, encouraging consumption within the yellow circle.

Take Punish Mee as an example of consumer-oriented platforms. The concept of Punish Mee came about in 2020. 'Punish' means buycott in the Yellow Economic Circle; the name 'Mee' was inspired by the 'Yuu' loyalty programme launched in July 2020 that consists of a coalition of the biggest brands in Hong Kong, including supermarkets, convenient stores, retail chains and restaurants (mostly 'blue' or 'red'). The developer of Punish Mee explicitly asserted his goal 'to break the monopoly by Yuu and OpenRice' in a LIHKG post (LIHKG, 2021c). Hence, the Punish Mee logo design even satirically mimics that of the Yuu Club. As early as October 2020, the Punish Mee organisers had started distributing banners and posters in several yellow restaurants (LIHKG, 2020g). On 1 May 2021, its mobile application was finally launched. By June 2021, more than

4000 yellow restaurants and shops in Hong Kong had joined the Punish Mee platform.[8] In half a year, the application had accumulated around 440,000 downloads and 252,000 members.[9]

The Punish Mee application showcases cross-platform affordances: there are, first and foremost, a yellow map and a search bar. In addition, its home page consists of a comprehensive yellow shopping and dining guide resembling OpenRice. However, its reward system works differently from Yuu or Yellow Family HK. Instead of linking monetary rewards with spending, which keeps a record of one's consumption patterns, Mee members can earn points by uploading photos of a yellow shop or getting upvotes in their reviews. It facilitates information exchange within the Yellow Economic Circle and helps the platform enrich its database. Besides the search function and reward system, there are articles and information about the special offers and discounts offered by businesses. For example, when the HKD5000 consumer voucher was distributed by the Hong Kong government in the fall of 2021, Punish Mee recommended various package combos of yellow shops for consumers to spend their voucher in. When a business was clicked on, Punish Mee would direct the user to a WhatsApp chat with the business to make a reservation, with an auto-generated message mentioning Punish Mee. On its side bar, there is a list of 'struggling businesses' (*gou-gap*) looking for customers to support them.[10] The interfaces and features of Punish Mee are a combination of yellow maps, dining guides, electronic 'word-of-mouth' communication and a consumer loyalty programme. Beyond merely mapping out where yellow and blue shops are or materialising political consumption in a single business activity, Punish Mee's affordances work as stimuli incentivising consumption within the Yellow Economic Circle, and allowing the consumption habits to feed back into the system, thus incentivising this behaviour, which is common in marketing strategies. This develops a cycle of consumer behaviour that turns political participation into an everyday practice.

It is important to note that Punish Mee also owns a public account across several social media platforms, including Facebook (@Mee.punishC), Instagram (mee_punishc), LIHKG (PunishXi), MeWe (Mee PunishXi), and Telegram (@PunishXi), to disseminate relevant updates on the Yellow Economic Circle and channel users back to their platform. It is a common practice for alternative media – media platforms that are usually financially independent and have a counter-hegemonic political stance – to make use of different social media platforms to generate publicity and increase readership (Shen et al., 2020). This multi-channel strategy also facilitates cross-platform user interactions in ways that the application alone cannot afford. Having an independently built application coupled with its expanded digital networks through multi-platform operation elicits a cross-platform play quite common in the Yellow Economic Circle. This cross-platform play decentres yet consolidates the digital democratic affordances offered by a single platform and amalgamates a more fluid, rhizomatically structured digital counter-public in habituating a new form of political consumerism.

Discussion and conclusion

The four case studies demonstrate how the multi-scalar digital platforms in Hong Kong afford and co-constitute political consumerism. First, the online forum LIHKG

epitomises a politics of the anonym, with its anonymous, depersonalised voting features. These features create a digital commons for an expansive deliberation of the Yellow Economic Circle. Second, the various versions of yellow mapping based on crowdsourced, open-source intelligence help the citizen-consumers identify the targets of political consumption and constitute a form of cartographical resistance. Third, several service-based platforms illustrate the different scales of co-optation of existing digital infrastructures that materialise political consumption in peer-to-peer business activities. Finally, the case study of Punish Mee showcases how an independently built, multifunction application (and its distributed social media networks) reinvents the logic of consumer-based platforms to incentivise political-consumers to continue spending and interacting within the Circle so as to build a yellow network.

The Yellow Economic Circle is a networked public (boyd, 2010), formed across multiple platforms, that constructs a shared identity with the pro-democracy camp, collective interests and common frames of buycott/boycott. As political consumerism is predominantly practised in private, these digital ties, as Parigi and Gong (2014) argue, are crucial in reinterpreting private actions as *public and collective*. This reinterpretation is of political significance in Hong Kong. When protests and opposition are not permissible under the National Security Law, citizens capitalise on the city's (still) open digital network and neoliberal market to develop a solidarity network in the consumer marketplace. The specific context and form of political participation that this study presents echo with Deseriis' (2021) emphasis that the analyses of digital platforms cannot be based merely on technological features or functions, but rather have to be unpacked with respect to the kinds of political behaviour and social space it affords. This study, therefore, goes beyond Dahlberg's (2011) and Deseriis' (2021) conceptualisations of digital democratic affordances and relates them to the broader theoretical and operational logic – and arguably the democratising potential – of consumer politics in Hong Kong. For example, the latter two case studies elicit affordances less explicitly linked to political participation than LIHKG and yellow mapping do, for they afford a more consumption-oriented than strictly political behaviour. The concept of Punish Mee, furthermore, encapsulates a counter-monopoly and counter-Chinese market idea that is intricately linked to the rising awareness in preserving local brands, businesses and cultures in Hong Kong. This extends the question of political consumerism to a more complex matrix of political, socio-economic and cultural questions that need to be further interrogated.

Although we have attributed divergent types of affordances to the respective platforms, we are not intent on drawing a direct causal relationship between a platform's specific affordances and the political outcomes they lead to. In fact, through our cross-platform analysis, we want to *debunk the essentialisation of a single platform's affordances* as static, unchanging, exclusive and having rigid boundaries (Deseriis, 2021). Rather, we see a more intricate relationship between the affordances of various platforms (of different scales, at different stages, and employed in different contexts) and how they co-constitute a more holistic set of affordances, which facilitates and enacts political participation. For instance, LIHKG's politics of the anonym and i-voting that produce a digital commons are also manifested in crowdsourced countermapping and Punish Mee, for they all rely on open-source intelligence and

depersonalised networks as well as allow equal participation without prior framing. Similar emerging platforms also share the affordances of the Yellow Economic Circle as a decentralised and leaderless movement. Operating on different levels and in different manners, they co-create a repertoire of political consumerist strategies in a democratic and open digital space.

Another commonality observed among the emerging, alternative, amateur-built platforms is the *reinvention and adaptation of existing digital infrastructures*, such as Google Form, Google Maps and Telegram Bot. On the one hand, they reflect the democratisation of platform construction afforded by the Web 2.0 devices (crowdsourcing, API, and visualisation tools) that enable collective political/civil projects such as the yellow maps or peer-to-peer yellow services. On the other hand, these financially independent, local and small-scale platforms demonstrate *adaptability* and *flexibility* in supporting the specific needs of the citizen-consumers. Such a feature can also be observed in the larger-scale, local platform LIHKG. For example, at the beginning of the Anti-ELAB movement, there was a range of radical opinions as well as 'moles' (referred to as 'ghosts' in Hong Kong) infiltrating the online forum. To prevent the 'anchoring effect' of the first visible opinions, the LIHKG administrator made the number of votes only visible some time after the thread had been created (LIHKG, 2019g). LIHKG demonstrates an awareness of what affordances and limitations its designs invoke, a responsiveness in its platform designs according to the latest usage patterns, as well as transparency in its adjustments of functions and settings. These are rarely seen in global corporate media platforms. In fact, the threads created by the LIHKG administrator[11] explaining the platform changes expose the presence of human actors in a non-human actant (platform), which essentially subverts the claim of neutrality in digital platforms.

While our comparative cross-platform approach traces the similarities and differences between multi-scalar platforms, we must go one step further to interrogate the methodological implications of 'cross-platform affordance' analysis. First, while the four case studies follow the chronological sophistication of the Circle, they by no means illustrate a linear temporality because these platforms (and others) continue to work in concert with one another (e.g. deliberation continues on LIHKG as the Circle develops) and even embed one another (e.g. Punish Mee incorporates crowdsourced mapping). Rather than essentialising each platform's affordances as serving a specific political function at a certain stage, we want to emphasise that the interplay between different platforms and their interactions with the citizen-consumers take shape *across time*.

Although mainstream social media platforms are not the focus of this article, our cross-platform analysis calls for the need to re-examine some commonly studied digital democratic affordances of social media, for instance, how the patterns of connective actions afforded by a personalised network of identified individuals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) are reshaped by the rise of impersonal and anonymous activist groups and civil initiatives that use social networking sites as a promotional platform (e.g. Punish Mee). Such a human–non-human cross-platform approach debunks affordances as technologically deterministic and renders them as fundamentally fluid and contextual.

Finally, to reflect on the term 'cross-platform', we acknowledge that the boundary of a platform is necessarily *ambiguous and porous*. Whereas Facebook operates with hyperlinks, live streaming, instant messaging, stories and so forth, our analysed platforms

heavily embed, reinvent, and build on other digital infrastructures (e.g. Wolipay operates with Google Maps API and Google Form; Yellowcab_hk functions with Telegram Bot). It is impossible to study a platform without considering how it is hybridised and cross-cuts with other platforms in its own operation. These complications – fluid temporality, dynamic human–non-human interactions, and ambiguities in defining platforms – problematise the notion of cross-platform affordances and the political actions they facilitate and limit. Further scholarly work is needed to address how the cross-platform dynamics between the global and the local, the mainstream and the alternative, the corporate and the amateur, social media and non-social media, reorganise our network society and co-constitute political actions.

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Notes

1. The classification of the label will be elaborated in the data analysis.
2. See Shen YF's Facebook post on 5 May 2020. Available at: https://bit.ly/3sMfiNg (accessed 20 May 2022).
3. We acknowledge that discourse analysis has its own methodological and empirical limitations. A future study, adopting data triangulation by using multiple qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews and ethnography, would yield a more holistic understanding of individual political consumers' intents and political consumerism practices, and the role of cross-platform affordances.
4. During the 2016 US presidential election, Reddit's categorising feature enabled Trump supporters to create memberships in the subreddit '(r/The_Donald)' and influence other members with their political narratives while excluding alternative views (Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas, 2021), whereas in LIHKG's case, users cannot create a sub-category on the platform. Threads about the political movement are simply created in the preset channels such as 'chit chatting' or 'politics'.
5. See comment #130 in LIHKG (2020e).
6. See Call4Van's Facebook post on 28 August 2019. Available at: www.facebook.com/IDS.CALL4VAN/posts/2412970372124514/ (accessed 7 October 2021).
7. See Call4Van's owner Conrad Wu's interview on 12 February 2020. Availabel at: https://bit.ly/3wwvK6h (accessed 20 May 2022).
8. See Tse, 2021 Available at: shorten.one/4VcsC (accessed 7 October 2021).
9. See Punish Mee's Instagram page. Available at: shorturl.at/jCXZ9 (accessed 22 February 2021).
10. Helping out struggling yellow businesses has become a common practice during the COVID-19 era, especially with the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government limiting opening conditions based on the use of a controversial corona checking application and vaccination status, leaving some yellow shops that refuse to comply with a reduced income.
11. Besides the main account named 'LIHKG' (membership number #1), the LIHKG administrative team also owns several individual accounts, for example, '望遠' (membership number #3). See 2019l.

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