To trust or not to trust? How Hong Kong protesters build and maintain trust in a leaderless movement

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Abstract

Protesters in leaderless movements face serious challenges when searching for reliable and trustworthy information in risky environments. Without formal structures to validate information, protestors are left to their own to evaluate the trustworthiness of information in a context where fake social media accounts and deception is possible. We interview protesters from the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement to uncover how they develop trust in fellow protesters and information channels.

We find that trust in collective political actions goes beyond the idea of social trust and include the concept of informational trust. Social and informational trust are intertwined with social media as well as with actual practices online and offline. In addition, the so-called 'sentinel' structure emerged organically. Information appears to be verified by multiple anonymous and independent sentinels for protestors to believe it. This is a sophisticated attendance to structural information source dependencies. Protestors use a mixture of social, communicative, and dependency cues to decide who and what to trust. They also use social media that has a dual role – simultaneously a community-building information space and a space for misinformation. The paper provides qualitative insight into how protesters deal with social and informational trust in leaderless movements.

Keywords: Trust-building, leaderless social movement, social media, semi-structured interview, thematic analysis, Hong Kong

Introduction

Historically, formal social movement organisations played a major role in mobilising citizens, form shared identities, and articulate clear demands (Schussman and Soule, 2005). However, social movements started to lack visible leadership in the last decade. Political parties are losing their ability to mobilise voters, and citizens are increasingly engaging in new, self-organised, and self-expressive forms of political participation. Gerbaudo (2017) argues that "Before politics became populist, social movements became populist". From the 2010 Arab Spring, the 2011 Occupy Wall Street, and to more recent Chilean protests in 2019 and the Thailand protests in 2020, we are entering a new age of leaderless revolution, which has been enabled by social media that allows for communication beyond traditional organisational structures.

Social media enhances the information flow and strengthens ties between protesters who can remain somewhat anonymous, can communicate with other protesters live and update them on new events, and thus increases the speed of protesters' response to actions from governments. Yet, social media poses fundamental challenges to protesters, as it facilitates the formation of fake identities (including potential agents from governments with a vested interest in diluting or distorting information flow) and the circulation of fabricated information, potentially putting protesters in danger. How protesters judge trusts in people and information becomes the key to survival in such networked leaderless movements.

This paper provides insights into this problem by interviewing participants in the recent Hong Kong (HK) protest movement, which was part of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement. We explore how protesters build trust with two focuses: social and informational trust – both intertwined with social media and other channels. Relying on the in-depth interviews with Anti-ELAB protesters, the elements affecting protesters' trust in fellow participants and diverse information are presented, and the connection between social and informational trust in leaderless movements is illustrated using thematic analysis. Initially, however, we review literature on trust and trust-building in leaderless movements and introduce the Anti-ELAB movement to set the theoretical and contextual scene for the interviews.

Trust as a concept

Scholars widely acknowledge the importance of trust, including its effects on reasoning and decision-making (e.g., Edelenbos and Klijn, 2007; Kim et al., 2008; Sensoy et al., 2013). Yet, little consensus has been reached on its definition due to disciplinary diversity and the word's

vagueness (Lewicki and Bunker, 1994; McKnight and Chervany, 1996, 2001). In political science, trust is a central component of cognitive social capital, stimulating cooperation, and forming a social network of mutual dependence in communities (Misztal, 2013; Putnam, 1996, 2000), which may foster collective actions like demonstrations (Benson and Rochon, 2014). Some focus on the idea of risk when defining trust (e.g., Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 2001), as reliance on information from others may make the person susceptible to deception or misinformation. This paper defines trust along Deutsch (1962) and Meyer et al. (1995), viewing trust as a risk-taking behaviour when one is willing to behave in a way that assumes the other will act as expected with positive outcomes, regardless of the ability to control the other. In leaderless movements, trust interacts with judgements, enabling protesters to go forward in risky and unpredictable situations.

Engagement in social movements involves participation where citizens initiate activities that attempt to change existing government policies (Putnam, 1996). Protests may elicit police violence, resulting in a high cost of participation. The consequences and risks are significant in movements without centralised decision-making structures (Giffin, 1967). Since the emergence of social media, the lack of structured leadership to guide messaging or combat misinformation online may make it easier to create chaos in the movement, escalating the risks involved. Therefore, trust is crucial in social movement participation, allowing protesters to overcome the uncertainties they face through forming optimistic expectations about others' actions and, crucial to the current article, the information they receive.

McKnight et al. (1998) argue that trust is formed in initial phases of relationships when parties are newly met and do not have solid, verifiable information about each other (see also Bigley and Pearce, 1998). This describes the relationships between protesters on the ground. They are strangers who may gauge the appropriate level of trust to accord each other at early stages. This also applies to receiving new information. Individuals must make trust choices based on the calculation of self-interest rationally (Lewicki and Bunker, 1994; Shapiro et al., 1992). Findings regarding initial trust levels are contradictory. Traditional trust theorists have assumed trust levels start small and gradually grow over time as individuals gain experience with or first-hand information about the other person (e.g., Rempel et al., 1985; Zand, 1972). In contrast, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (2006) and Luo and Zhang (2016) discovered high initial trust levels in their studies about workplaces and virtual travel communities. In leaderless movements, where the risk level is elevated, such high initial trust may therefore be required to mobilise protesters and sustain the movement's momentum.

While there are different ways to operationalise and understand trust, we explore how people use information in leaderless movements where no formal structure can check or communicate. We therefore take trust to mean the perceived reliability of information that a person gets from other people. This is in line with trust concepts from information theory (e.g., Bovens & Hartman, 2003; Hahn et al., 2009). There are two core elements from this field to note here. First, the degree to which sources are perceived to be reliable as an amalgamation of perceived expertise (do they have access to accurate information) and trustworthiness (do they have intention of honestly communicating what they believe, see Harris et al., 2015). This denotes the *quality* of the source. Second, the perceived relationship between sources if a person encounters multiple testimonies on the same issue. If the sources are dependent (e.g., three people who convey reports they got from the same one person), sequential testimonies should be less impactful than if the sources are independent from each other (e.g., the sources have reported the same issue without having spoken to each other or any joint sources). This denotes the *dependency* of sources. Perceived reliability and dependency influence how people treat information (Madsen et al., 2020).

McKnight et al. (1998) propose a model of initial trust building (Figure 1). This model was first applied to interpersonal trust in new organisational relationships (McKnight et al., 1998) and later interpreted trust in virtual organisations, e-commerce consumer actions and technological platforms by proposing other technology-specific trusting beliefs (e.g., Chi et al., 2021; Gwebu et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2019).
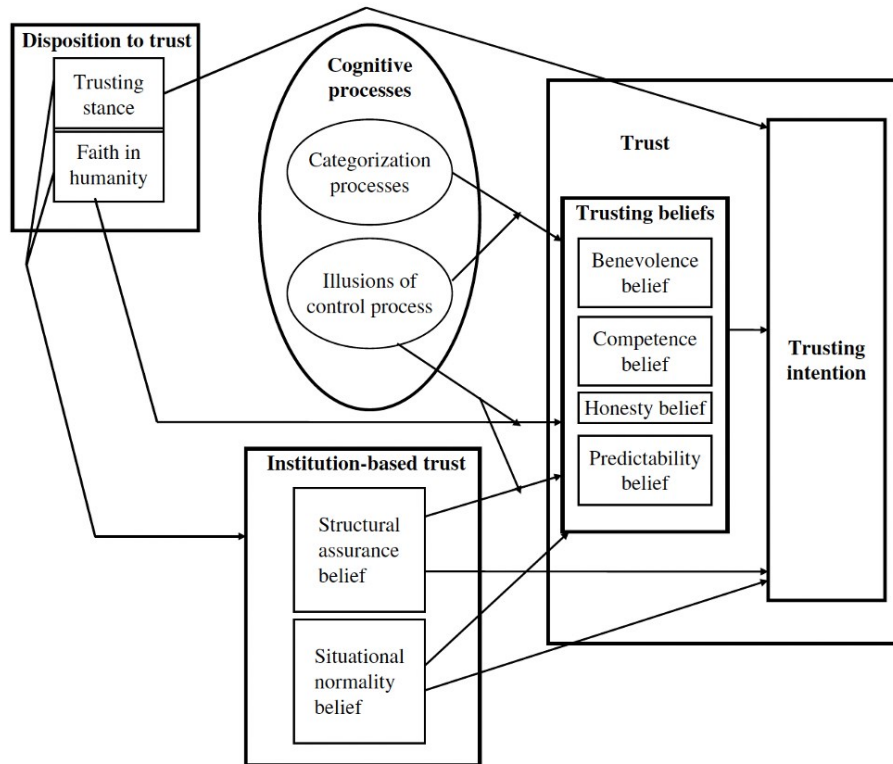
Figure 1: Initial Trust-building Model (McKnight et al., 1998)

While some studies argue trust and competence are orthogonal (Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007), the model assumes they are connected. Trusting beliefs mean one believes someone is benevolent, competent, honest, and predictable (Mayer et al., 1995), and these favourable attributes facilitate the formation of trusting intention toward a person. In addition, disposition to trust and institutional-based trust influence overall trusting intention. The former is especially relevant to this study. It includes faith in humanity (whether assumes others are typically reliable), and a trusting stance (whether one is willing to depend upon others regardless of beliefs in others). The model predicts processes that impact initial trust: reputation inference, in-group categorisation and stereotyping. Lastly, people try to assure themselves that things are under control by token control efforts when placing trust. The model's adaptability makes it helpful to understand the judging process by which protesters build trust in offline and online settings during the movement.

Trust building among protesters in diverse information environments.

As already mentioned, we focus on social as well as informational trust when analysing trust building among protesters. We analyse social trust as interpersonal trust. It represents the faith protesters invest in each other that helps solve collective action problems (Brehm and Rahn,

1997; Inglehart, 1990). In volatile environments, protestors must attempt to reduce uncertainty and subjectively assess fellow trustworthy protesters. This process is highly dependent on social identification, seeking connections with protesters who share similar beliefs and aims (Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Chayinska and Minescu, 2018; Hogg, 2020). Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, 1979) states that group distinctions lead to conflict and distrust. Hence, social trust tends to build on the belief that in-group members are more trustworthy and honest than out-group members under in-group favouritism (Levin et al., 2006). Delhey et al. (2011) categorised interpersonal trust into in-group and out-group trust depending on familiarity and closeness. Following this classification, trust between protesters (who are often unfamiliar strangers) would be considered an out-group trust. This should hamper trust building among protesters. However, several social movement studies found that social trust unites diverse participants in social movements by being a platform for a collective identity of protesters (e.g., Diani, 2000; Soon and Kluver, 2014).

In fast-paced, leaderless environments, protesters need to make trust-related judgements in real life situations. For example, if a protester claims a police crackdown is imminent, it is pertinent to act on this information (if reliable). Cuddy et al. (2007, 2008) claim that people use two fundamental dimensions to perceive others: warmth and competence. Warmth judgements influence how much people trust or doubt others' motives, whereas competence judgements relate to evaluating others' ability to enact their motives effectively[1]. Considerable evidence claims warmth judgments (e.g., friendliness, trustworthiness, and kindness) are made more quickly than competence judgments (e.g., intelligence, power, and skill) and have a greater impact on overall attitudes, especially newly encountered people (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009; Willis and Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke and Abele, 2008). Hence, we expect protesters to rely on warmth judgement to build initial trust in social movements and competence judgments later on. Stereotyping is an element affecting initial trust formation (McKnight et al., 1998).

Leaderless movements pose a serious challenge for protesters to determine trustworthy information. Without formal communication structures, protesters often rely on an extensive array of information circulates on social media channels to know what is going on. Unlike traditional publishing, digital information often lacks authority indicators as people have the flexibility to be anonymous. Protesters must live with shaky conditions for building

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[1] As discussed in the previous section, these categories are mirrored in cognitive psychological reasoning literature where reliability is described as trustworthiness and expertise (Harris et al,. 2015)

informational trust. There are no guaranteed standards for posting information online, allowing altered, plagiarised, and misrepresented information, making it difficult for protesters to decide which information to trust (Fritch and Cromwell, 2002; Metzger et al., 2003). With no leadership or structure to confirm or deny reports, protesters are faced with a serious information challenge. Indeed, people who fail to differentiate newsworthy and time-sensitive topics are likely misled by unreliable or fabricated information (Castillo et al., 2011). As such, it is necessary for protesters to develop standards of assessing information credibility, especially when there is no centralised information dissemination channel. Trust in social media and other information channels therefore becomes crucial for overall trust building among protesters.

Social movements relying on digital media may thus give rise to the concept of system trust, which is the confidence in the functioning of social media platforms based on their affordance (Haciyakupoglu and Zhang, 2015). For social movements, social media affordances refer to the platforms' features that help protesters achieve their goals and encourage certain actions * Davis & Chouinard, 2016). According to Friedman et al. (2000), system trust is affected by users' emotional and cognitive responses that derive from their *experience and familiarity* with the system. People use social media platform they perceive as credible, secure, and user-friendly (Corritore et al., 2003; see also Metzger et al., 2010; Sundar, 2008).
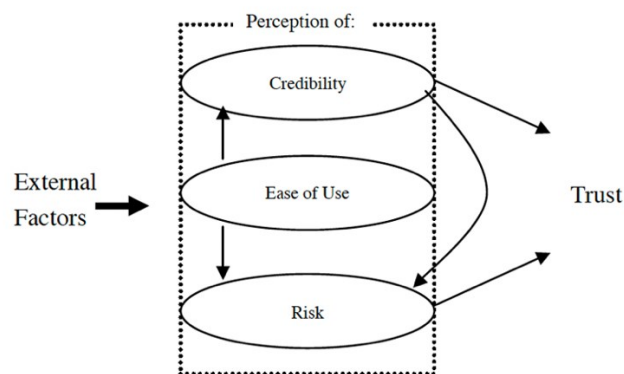

Figure 2: Model of Online Trust (Corritore et al., 2003)

Corritore et al. (2003) concluded three primary aspects that influence trust online (Figure 2). First, perceived credibility consists of honesty, expertise, predictability, and reputation – much in line with McKnight, see figure 1. Fogg et al. (2001) and Shelat and Egger (2002) asserted that providing valuable and comprehensive content, which conveys expertise without bias, enhances platform affordances. Ganesan (1994) identified reputation as a characteristic of credibility, and it cues the quality of the platform's previous performances. Predictability reflects a similar idea in social trust, in which users assume the platform acts within

expectations. Second, perceived ease of use shows the platform's simpleness, which is associated with the design and interface elements, searching functions and navigation (Nielsen et al., 2000; Standford et al., 2002). Last, perceived risk means the likelihood of an undesirable outcome (Deutsch, 1958). It relates to personal safety in complex online environments (Hansson et al., 2021). As such, a high trust scenario should possess high perceived credibility and ease of use but low perceived risk, creating a safe space for protesters to discuss sensitive topics online. Previous research found this model helpful in evaluating social media affordances concerning contentious politics and collective identity (Khazraee and Novak, 2018; Milan, 2015; Vitak and Ellison, 2012). Hence, it serves as a reference to predict how protesters develop trust in social media platforms, contributing to information evaluation in the present study.

Context: The networked leaderless movement in Hong Kong

The Anti-ELAB (Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill) movement, a series of initially peaceful marches turned into a political uprising in Hong Kong (HK), began when millions of citizens took to the streets in the summer of 2019 to protest a bill that would allow extradition to mainland China (Lee et al., 2019; Yeung, 2019). As the clashes between the police and protesters became increasingly violent, the government withdrew the bill after months. However, it was too late to quell the movement's momentum. With police growing brutality to the protest, demonstrations continued seeking full democracy and targeting police abuse of power, igniting prolonged citywide riots in which police fired live bullets and protesters threw petrol bombs.

Unlike previous HK protests, the Anti-ELAB movement had no recognised leaders or leading organisations responsible for protests or the social movement. Aside from several mass marches organised by Civil Human Rights Front at the early stage, media have described the movement as leaderless, with the locals claiming to have "no central stage" (Ag, 2019; Ku, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; McLaughLin, 2019). The HK movement is similar to other leaderless movements worldwide, like the Arab Spring and Turkey's Gezi Protests, enabled by digital communication technologies (Lai and Sing, 2020). Protesters use social media platforms, such as Telegram (TG), the LIHKG online forum (a forum based in Honk Kong similar to Reddit) and Facebook (FB), to connect, coordinate and mobilise anonymously (Ku, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Ting, 2020). Surveys regarding information receiving patterns showed that most people received information via online news outlets or forums (Lai and Sing, 2020; Lee et al., 2019).

The flat organisational structure formed a multitude of online decentralised decision-making platforms, consisting of notable movement leaders organising conventional peaceful rallies and anonymous activists putting together various protest tactics ingeniously. Those mass actions included airport sit-ins, economic boycotts via the Yellow Economic Circle, human chains across the city, artistic protests via the Lennon Wall and chanting of the song "Glory to Hong Kong" (Lai and Sing, 2020).

"Be Water", a phrase from late martial arts star Bruce Lee, was embraced by protesters as the philosophy and motto of the movement to make sense of the fluidity of the protests. Instead of staying in one spot, protesters moved strategically and dynamically across different protest sites within the city, forming spontaneous rallies, roadblocks, and sit-ins (Lai and Sing, 2020). Local activists named this strategy "blossom everywhere". It required swift mobilisation on the Internet a day or two in advance and was coordinated almost in real-time using TG and mass Airdrops as demonstrations occurred (Ting, 2020). The decentralised approach to planning and launching protests brought together peaceful and militant protesters, the anonymous and well-known protesters, allowing various tactics with different degrees of violence and innovation to play a part in the movement. Nevertheless, the leaderless feature posed risks to the movement, including lacking legitimate representatives to deescalate conflicts, rising illegal violence, and underestimating the impacts of various tactics due to unthorough communication and lack of experience (Lai and Sing, 2020).

Researchers placed attention on the technological aspect of the Anti-ELAB movement. A range of studies discussed the role of digital media and its significance in organisation and coordination (e.g., Lee et al., 2021; Liang and Lee, 2021; Poon and Kohlberger, 2022; Ting, 2020; Wang and Zhou, 2021). While some explored topics related to the social aspect, mainly on solidarity between the moderate and radical protesters and its contribution to the movement's sustainability (Lai and Sing, 2020; Lee, 2019; Leung and Fang, 2022). Yet, despite the importance of trust in social movements as presented above, it has not been explored as a partof the HK information system (although, see Cheng et al., 2022 for a description of the HK protesters' capacity to adapt in the movement). Our paper directly fills this gap in the literature by exploring how information is shared, how trust is built and maintained, and the development of online systems to make information reliable.

Few studies regarding the Anti-ELAB movement mention the actual experiences and encounters of the protesters, and none relate to trust building. Furthermore, most research about trust is quantitative, lacking the qualitative depth in understanding how people develop trust in specific scenarios. Despite scholars believing trust influences political participation (e.g.,

Hansson et al., 2021; Suh and Reynolds-Stenson, 2018), the critical role of trust on and off the ground in the Anti-ELAB movement, and more importantly, discussions about the mechanisms in which trust was built remain minimal concerning the networked leaderless movements from a broader perspective.

Research Questions and method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to answer the research question: ***How did HK protesters build mutual trust in a networked leaderless movement?***

Three primary research questions are examined: *1) How did protesters develop social trust in fellow protesters? 2) How did protesters develop informational trust, i.e. evaluate the trustworthiness of diverse online and offline information? 3) How did protesters develop trust in diverse social media and other channels of information?*

Research design Since trust is a subjective, complicated, and vague concept which is hard to define and quantify, we adopt a qualitative research design that focuses on personal experiences and interpretations from individuals involved in the movement (Denny and Weckesser, 2018; Mohajan, 2018), which allows exploration of the trust-building process and factors influencing protesters' trust-related judgements. This provides a detailed understanding of trust-building behaviours in a networked leaderless movement (Hammerslay, 2013; Della Porta, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their thoughts in an organised yet flexible manner (Della Porta, 2014). Using open-ended and probing questions encouraged interactions and revealed unanticipated phenomena, enhancing the richness and clarity of the data (Robson and McCartan, 2016). This is useful for sensitive topics, as individuals may be more willing to open in a one-to-one setting as interviews can protect their privacy (Punch, 1986). The exploratory nature of the study also supports the use of interviews. Interviews provide an ideal setting to obtain self-generated definitions and insights on how respondents make sense of their judgements without influencing by others in any form and to gain first-hand information (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). A topic guide was developed to translate the research question into open-ended questions in a language that makes sense to the respondents (Brinkmann, 2013). It acted as a framework to remind the researcher subjects to cover in the interview, thus searching for answers to the research question. The guide contained five main themes: 1) involvement in the movement; 2) trust building among protesters on the ground; 3)

information receiving patterns; 4) trust building in the online setting; 5) social media usage and perception.

Participants and recruitment We interview 17 HK people who participated in onsite protests in the Anti-ELAB movement and are currently living in the United Kingdom. We use purposive sampling to maximise the chances of generating more precise research results (Mayan, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2013; Patino and Ferreira, 2018). Since this study examined trust building in both offline and online settings, identifying, and selecting participants who participated physically in the movement and are experienced in using social media simultaneously was necessary. Participants vary in gender, occupation, education level, and involvement in the movement, allowing diversity within the target population. They were aged between 20 and 39. Lastly, restricting the respondents to those living in the UK was an ethical consideration as discussing issues related to the movement may attract the authorities' attention in HK. The sampled population for the study is unique, which we discuss in the limitations section.

Interviews were conducted online due to COVID-19 and geographical constraints. However, the flexibility of online interviews enhanced cost-effectiveness, convenience, and accessibility (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). The option of not using videos benefited the interview process as removing the visual clues reduced the interviewer effect during the interviews (O'Connor et al., 2008). More importantly, online audio interviews protected the respondents' privacy and helped discuss sensitive topics like respondents' involvement in the movement (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013; Madge and O'Connor, 2004). Snowball recruitment stopped when no new substantive information was acquired, reaching data saturation (Palinkas et al., 2013). The interviews were conducted from 23rd of May to 10th of June 2022. The length varied from 32-100 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the respondents' mother tongue, to create a comfortable environment that facilitated fluid discussions.

Ethical considerations Since discussing politically sensitive topics is considered high risk, the ethics application was reviewed and approved before conducting the research. Involving protesters in the study posed unavoidable risks to the participants and the researcher. Thus, mitigating potential risks was a focus when designing this study (Della Porta, 2014). We briefed potential interviewees about the purpose of the study and gave a detailed information sheet to those who showed interest along with a consent form before the interview took place to ensure they were genuinely informed about the study and their rights to withdraw from the interview anytime without further consequences. Pseudonyms are used to represent the

participants during data collection, analysis, and reporting to preserve their identities (Fujii, 2012; Kvale, 2007).

Data analysis approach All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in Cantonese. Instead of using auto-transcription software, manual transcription was adopted. Transcription is an interpretive process involving judgements like the extent of details and features to capture, which directly affect data interpretation and representation (Bailey, 2008). The transcribed data was then translated into English for further analysis.

We use thematic analysis to show patterns in respondents' trust-related experiences and identify similarities and differences in how participants made trust-related judgements (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following Braun and Clarke (2016), codes were generated, and themes were developed after collating the codes. The process of thematic coding involved both deductive and inductive approaches. McKnight et al. (1998) suggested a model that explained initial trust building, which informs initial codes. The inductive analysis generated new insights by uncovering meanings from participants' trust-building experiences in a leaderless movement. A codebook was used to systematically track and document the analysis. To better visualise the analysis, Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic network (Figure 3) was also used to connect and summarise the codes and themes, addressing the research question.

Results

Findings indicate that protesters developed sophisticated information strategies that include concerns for reliability, independence of sources (via the so-called 'sentinels'), and that social media experiences and on-the-ground encounters simultaneously influenced how they trusted fellow participants and information in the movement. Social trust is a mixture of cognitive processes, social clues, and protesters' disposition to trust, while informational trust is shaped via information credibility and social media affordances. In the following, we illustrate the main themes that emerged from the interviews via select quotes from anonymised participants.
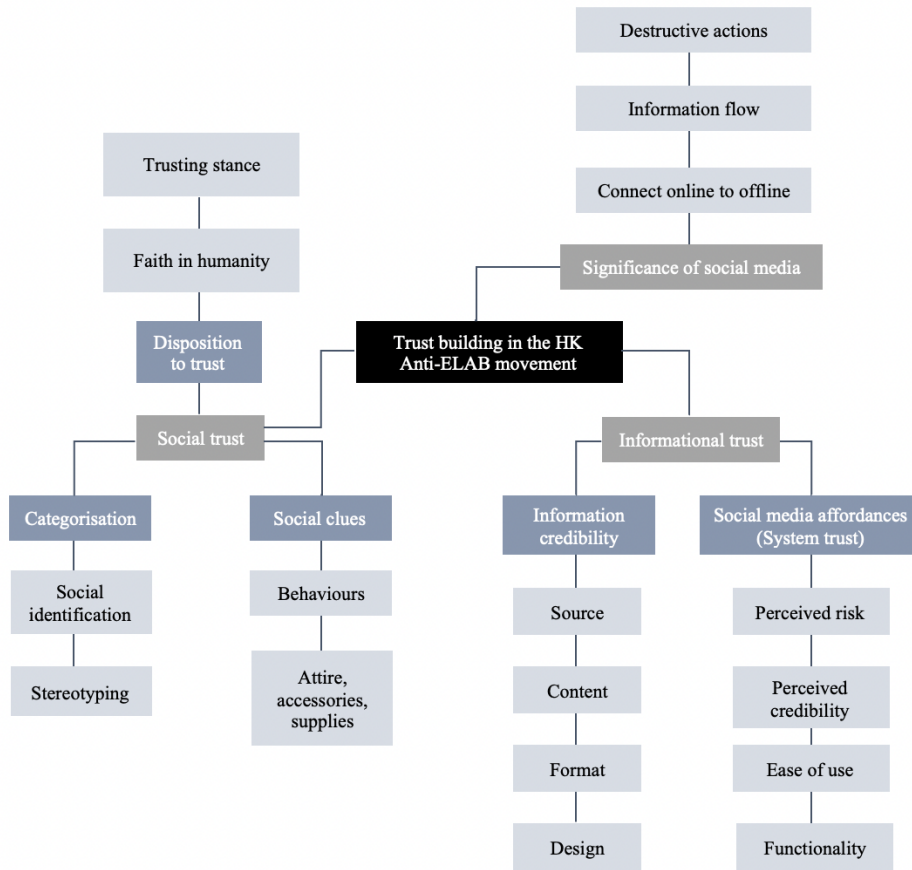
Figure 3: Thematic Network

Significance of social media

Social media played a dominant role the HK movement – this is especially necessary, as the leaderless structure means greater reliance on a distributed network of contributors that can unite protesters by **connecting them online to offline** and **bridging the online world to reality**. Several participants pointed to the importance of social media as an information and community-building resource.

> *P17: It formed a sub-culture which could quickly gather a large group of people. People shared common languages, like local slangs, and published memes that allowed us to vent our anger and express our emotions. This atmosphere online pulled us together and consolidated our identity as protesters. It invisibly strengthened our beliefs.*

This point coincidentally responded to the core motivation why respondents went to protest. Most participants wanted to create a more powerful impact in person after realising many others shared similar visions in the online community. In other words, that social media was instrumental in establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging and a feeling of community.

> *P1: We could sense that we shared the same philosophy while out there. Even though we did not know each other, we still gathered as a group to fight for a common goal.*

Participants also note the power of social media to provide **free space for information and opinion sharing**, encouraging more people to participate in the movement. This highlights the role of social media as a tool beyond community-making and belonging, as it becomes a central path for information *about* the protests.

> *P3: I received information via first-hand videos shared by citizens to uncover information not reported in mainstream media. When we found out what happened did not align with the police's reports, those videos that went viral online were the evidence. Everyone played a role in sharing information that they believed was accurate.*

Yet, the interviewed people are by no means uncritical consumers of social media information. They are savvy and realise that the freedom to share whatever people want on social media might lead to **destructive actions**, promoting mutual distrust.

> *P10: People can do anything anonymously online, encouraging those with bad intentions to share fake news and confuse the protesters.*

This highlights the positive and negative aspects of social media, as perceived by participants in the Anti-ELAB movement. On the one hand, they offer protestors a tool for community and identity-building. The use of social media for community building is seen in other areas such as individual with disabilities (Sweet et al., 2020). While this offers a constructive tool for protestors, participants flag the potential downsides to the information received through social media, as anonymous participants may fabricate or provide poor information. In the following, we expand this by considering the social elements of the community and then consider the informational challenge.

Social Trust

Alongside their use of social media, participants mentioned their general trust in other people as a factor in how they use information. In line with predictions from the literature review, **high initial trust** among respondents were reported at the early stage of the movement. Respondents were asked to rate their initial trust level, which yielded an average score of 8.18 out of 10.

Respondents tended to **believe fellow protesters held a kind intention**. Thus, they depended on each other. Referring to McKnight et al.'s (1998) model, protesters possessed high trusting stances, reflecting their high disposition to trust.

> *P11: I was in Sheung Wan when a kid asked me about the situation at the front as he heard that frontline protesters had conflicts with the police. Soon, the kid and I started*

to walk around together, checking the safety of different areas. The kid trusted me. He even gave me his actual phone number. We teamed up, and it worked well.

Moreover, respondents unanimously **assumed others were reliable in situations affecting personal safety**. Viewing McKnight et al.'s (1998) perspective, protesters strongly believed in humanity in a high-risk environment.

P4: One night, a few teenage girls gathered at a corner to change their clothes when the protest was about to finish. I dropped by and told them I would help to cover them. But suddenly, the police came, and we ran. The girls relied on me and followed me to escape. They trusted me that I would help them to escape.

While this shows high levels of initial trust among protestors, some revealed that **hesitations and struggles were unavoidable** in their judgement processes.

P6: Buying gas masks was uneasy back then, and I knew a girl who needed them from TG. The girl was stubborn. Whenever I asked her if she needed anything else or had enough cash for food, she would only reply, "I do not need others. I only need gas masks." I was pretty scared the first time we met in person. I ran away immediately after giving her the masks. I even stayed outside for a few more hours to ensure no one was following me before returning home. I was worried that she was undercover or that she would trick me.

This again demonstrates the precarious situation in which protestors navigated. They need to assume high levels of trust for the movement to coalesce and be created, but this happens in an environment where recriminations and dangers were present. Indeed, trust levels remained high until undercovers were discovered. After this revelation for the protestors, trust dropped drastically.

P1: When the police pretended to be protesters, what I mentioned about trust just now became inapplicable. The trust level dropped immediately from then. Because there was less trust, the movement became less cohesive. You would worry that the person next to you might put you in danger. That was when I started to go out less frequently.

Trust is a dynamic and difficult concept in leaderless movements. Initially, respondents suggest that you need a high degree of trust as a foundational baseline. Without this, it is doubtful that information systems can even begin to form in leaderless settings. However, trust is not static, but evolves over time, as protesters learn about the political and informational environment. As soon protesters learned of undercover police infiltrating the movement, trust was naturally lowered and afforded to people with whom they had prior connections. Interestingly, as we shall discuss later, HK protestors developed sophisticated information channels (the so-called 'sentinels') that responded to the lowering of general trust.

To build trust, protestors followed to broad categorisation processes, which echo the assumptions of McKnight et al. (1998). First, respondents decided who to trust based on **social identification**. Based on in-group favouritism, protesters identified each other with similarities they shared and developed a sense of belongings with the group. Oppositely, they distinguished each other with their differences and regarded those as out-groups.

> *P6: There was a period when we were asked not to tuck in our shirts during the protest, and you would keep a distance when you saw someone did not do so.*

Respondents also made trust-related judgements according to existing **stereotypes** about one's age, aura, and appearance. Protesters used age to identify two groups of participants who posed minimum threats to others: teenagers and middle-aged 'aunties'.

> *P9: The younger the person, the less likely they were the police or undercovers. I would lower my wary if the one next to me were a teen. Maybe those who looked older or males who went out alone would be more suspicious.*

Regarding aura, a few identified with people who looked honest and competent. According to McKnight et al. (1998), these favourable attributes demonstrate protesters' trusting beliefs, enhancing their trust in others.

> *P1: I tended to trust those parents who brought their kids out. For this group of people, I even wanted to protect them when situations became dangerous. You know, bringing kids out to protest is uneasy. I could see their persistence, and they seemed to be more rational.*

After undercover police may have infiltrated the movement, protestors began to rely on more stereotypical and social cues to identify who to trust rather than simply assigning high trust to begin with. Of course, this introduces a potential arms race, as these traits can be, to some extent, faked. However, as snap judgments, these cues form the basis for subjective impressions of trust.

In addition to social cues, respondents also observed others' **behaviours** when deciding whether to believe in fellow protesters. They mentioned that protesters offered help frequently. The benevolence and kindness of protesters made them feel approachable, generating positive feelings towards each other.

> *P8: I only carried my camera and lens when I first took photos on the ground. I forgot about my mask and other stuff. There were tear gases, and people gave me face masks and water. People cared for each other, and when people cared about you, you would reciprocate and care about the person. I would say we trusted each other a lot back then.*

Comparatively, behaviours seen to be strange or redundant made them feel daunted, developing negative feelings towards those people. In other words, protestors would look for behaviours that were unexpected to guide their subjective impressions of other people.

> *P11: People who were absent-minded with what they were doing looked suspicious. For example, placing their hands around the belt in the hot weather are what police would do. I would say it is the reflex action of the police. Some people kept looking around or looked like they were measuring things. Well, those who received professional training or not showed a big difference. Someone skilled could hardly pretend he had not.*

This demonstrates that protesters relied on a sophisticated mesh of social inferences. When behaviours differ from expectations (e.g., remaining very calm when a protest is raided), it offers evidence that a person may be an undercover police officer. This is akin to looking for negative evidence – falsifying assumptions rather than looking for confirmatory evidence.

Lastly, respondents also considered one's **attire**, **accessories**, and **supplies** in their trust-related judgements. Black Bloc was adopted throughout the movement. When in Black Bloc, protesters wore head-to-toe black clothing, masks, scarves, helmets, or other face-concealing items to protect their identities when protesting.

> *P6: If someone wore jeans, I knew the person was inexperienced because the person was not well-prepared.*
>
> *P7: I would be more alert when someone looked like a militant protester without a full attire or when a person put on a mask but without a helmet.*
>
> *P15: We had been mentioning Black Bloc since the beginning. If someone was all black with a face covered even under the boiling hot weather, I could quickly recognise them as protesters.*

Protestors use a variety of cues to guesstimate whether to trust people they meet in the protests. This includes social evaluations, physical and attire cues, and expected behaviours. These all guide a subjective evaluation of whether a person can be trusted, which goes beyond the initial high degree of trust that protestors assumed. This shows the dynamics of social trust, as the movement progresses.

Informational trust

Aside from knowing **who** to trust, protestors also need to determine **what** to trust in terms of the information they see. There are several information challenges that come with being in a leaderless movement. First, related to the social problem of who to trust, information sources may be more or less reliable, which has a direct impact on belief revision (Hahn et al., 2009).

Information from sources that protestors subjectively believe to be reliable (e.g., using the cues discussed above) should carry more weight than information from less reliable sources (Bovens & Hartmann, 2004). This has been shown experimentally to be true (Harris et al., 2015; Madsen, 2016). In addition, dependencies are critical to information in social networks. If information comes from independent sources (i.e., two people who report the same without having been in communication with each other), it is stronger than information that comes from people who may have spoken together before sending the reports (as this may influence each reporter's view of the evidence). Like reliability, experiments show that people are sensitive to these dependencies (Madsen et al., 2020). In leaderless movements, it is very difficult to assess who is a reliable source and what sources are independent from each other. As such, protestors must assess who is reliable and the dependency of sources. As we show in the following, the HK protest movement developed interesting tools to deal with these challenges.

In the interviews, respondents emphasised the importance of **information sources** in evaluating whether to trust a piece of information. The source initially affected respondents' impression of the information. Respondents tended to believe in information after identifying a reliable source.

> *P9: Because I worked in PR, I was familiar with the media landscape, like who owned the media, the media's stance, etc. Sometimes when the news reported something that contradicted what I witnessed, I would develop a poor impression of those news media. The Stand News, Apple Daily, and iCable are pro-democratic media. They supported the movement and were more trustworthy.*

> *P8: You would not trust information from the TV anymore. The way you chose the source online mattered the most. You would look at who runs this channel, whether a reliable person or an authoritative organisation.*

When respondents were onsite, they relied on first-hand information primarily. If they were off the ground, whether the source, meaning the person who disseminated the information, was physically present in the situation became an essential factor in evaluating the information's trustworthiness. Information shared from witnesses was agreed to be more convincing.

> *P13: Seeing is believing. The network was poor, and you did not have time to keep track of the news when you were outside. You usually depend on first-hand environmental clues to make judgements.*

Fascinatingly, many respondents highlighted the significant contribution of "sentinels" during the movement. "Sentinels" were guards stationed at different spots to keep watch on onsite situations, primarily the moves of the police. During the movement, "sentinels" opened TG

channels to report instant onsite information, and protesters counted on the updates to decide their next steps. All respondents agreed the "sentinel" channels were reliable because the information there was witnessed by fellow protesters. Some even regarded "sentinels" as the official information source of the movement.

> *P3: I relied on the "sentinels" for information. I think that information was reliable as they sent someone on the ground to do this job. Sometimes, there was just too much information online. So, the real-time reporting from the "sentinels" was exceptionally helpful.*

> *P17: The "sentinel" TG broadcast channels were reliable. They provided information on exactly what happened at an exact time. I relied on them heavily to decide when and where to go out. I trusted this information the most.*

One of the respondents was a "sentinel", explaining the operation of the "sentinel" channels. Typically, the larger scale of the channel, the more systematic and reliable. Some took longer for information sharing because they required a more stringent reporting mechanism.

> *P11: "Sentinels" were protesters spread across districts. We were required to follow specific formats when reporting the information to the channel admin. You needed to meet their reporting requirements, like their style of taking photos as proofs and the reporting format, to gain the chance to publish your information. The channel would post the information if there were two to four "sentinels" reporting the same issue. This type was the most reliable but the slowest in terms of speed. These channels aimed to help protesters participate in planning where and how to join the gang. For others, they sent their team on the ground to verify the information directly, which shortened the fact-checking time.*

This description shows that HK protestors were intuitively aware of the dependency challenge. The fact that information was only verified once 2-4 sentinels independently reported on the same issue demonstrates a very sophisticated emergent information channel that allows for dependency-related verification while retaining anonymity and safety of sentinels. Credibility checks were not only applied to verify the information on the "sentinel" channels but were also used to select suitable protesters as "sentinels".

> *P11: To join the team, the channel admin evaluated the frequency and accuracy of my reporting. There were some basic requirements to fulfil when reporting the news. If you could not meet the standard, it would affect the message's accuracy, and your information would not be picked up. We discovered undercovers in our group a few times and needed to set up a new group.*

Again, this demonstrates a highly adaptive and selective information process that uses the lack of a leader or formal structure to generate a new and reliable, yet anonymous channel of information. This is paramount to keeping reliable information flowing across the network while simultaneously protecting sentinels.

Apart from the source, respondents examined the **content**, **format**, **writing** and **design** when judging information credibility. Concerning content, protesters believed in factual and precise information, such as the protest schedule, locations of the police etc., because the information was neutral with good intentions. Meanwhile, cross-checking is a technique that was commonly practised among protesters to verify the information content, preventing them from believing in fake news.

> *P2: The protest schedules usually showed the organisers' names, and I always cross-checked the organisers across TG groups. If the information were being widely discussed or shared by netizens, I would believe that it was something real. Likewise, when I saw someone posted the information on LIHKG, I would go to traditional media like RTHK, Apple Daily, and iCable, to check if they also reported on the case. If the information was something I could verify by myself, such as the car plate number, I could check that out on some official public websites.*

As with the sentinels, we see cross-checking and dependency-based verification as a definite information strategy. This is a fascinating way to address the problem of dependency and reliability in a leaderless movement. Regarding format, respondents regarded live streaming as the most reliable, as it was real-time reporting without post-editing. Supporting visuals also made the information credible. Although a few questioned its authenticity as images and short video clips could be post-edited, respondents generally looked at information with supporting visuals instead of those without.

> *P4: You could still do post-editing even with words, images, and videos. It was straightforward to produce fake news. But live streaming is instant, you cannot make post-editing. It was more reliable.*

The approach to information verification and trust displays several sophisticated strategies. The sentinel program emerged organically as a response to the challenge of how to get reliable and verified information to protestors in leaderless movements. This relied on corroborated reports from multiple trusted sources as the primary source of information. In an information-theoretic perspective, this shows intuitive and emergent use of dependencies, reliability, and verification. Further, the type of content (e.g., first-hand live streaming rather than second-hand hearsay) impacted the assessment of the evidence.

Evaluation of social media channels

Along with assessing the information itself, respondents considered social media affordances in their judgements on trustworthy information. TG was the most used platform among protesters, followed by LIHKG, FB and Instagram (IG) based on their various affordances.

Applying McKnight et al.'s (1998) model to the online setting, the findings suggested the **perceived risk**, **credibility**, and **functionality** contributed to respondents' trusting belief towards a piece of information. The former three referenced from Corritore et al.'s (2003) model of online trust, while functionality was a new aspect discovered in the interviews.

Anonymity and encryption lowered the perceived risk of social media platforms. With anonymity, protesters did not need to reveal their identity, ensuring a safe participation environment online. However, users must be aware of fake accounts spreading information that confuses them.

> *P7: The pro of LIHKG was they allowed everyone to participate anonymously, lowering the risk of participating. Yet, the con would be harder to gatekeep who was in the group as everyone was anonymous. You would not know whether the people in the group had the same stance as you or would others spread fake news in the group. When some did not fact-check the information received, it would lead to misinformation.*

The encrypted messaging feature provided a secure space for protesters to communicate politically sensitive topics. Respondents looked at the platforms' reputations for perceived credibility, meaning their impressions of the platforms' quality and previous performances. Respondents trusted the platforms more if they had good reputations.

> *P11: I recall the founder of TG is a Russian, and he supported the HK movement.*
> *P8: FB is pro-Beijing, selling data to the Beijing government. I would avoid expressing myself there.*

Whether true or not, the perception of allegiances and anonymity of competing platforms was essential in choosing channels. Whether the platform offered a wide range of protest information was also a consideration when evaluating its perceived credibility.

Lastly, the platform's **functionality** affected its affordance. Respondents used social media platforms for different purposes during the movement and developed trust in those that fulfilled their needs. First, TG and LIHKG provided open spaces to disseminate instant information updates about the movement, which was valuable to protesters. Thus, protesters trusted these two platforms for information sharing.

> *P1: I used TG due to its immediacy. I instantly received information from TG as it did not require a photo following a post, which took time to load.*

Second, protesters used TG as a primary communication tool throughout the movement because they believed in the platform's security and privacy management. Third, LIHKG, FB and IG allowed protesters to exchange and express their thoughts about the movement. Protesters utilised this function to understand others' views.

> *P15: There were heated discussions on LIHKG with people sharing reflections on different activities, actions, and strategies.*

Similar to how protestors determine if they can trust other people and can trust the information they receive, the choice of platform is a mixture of trial-and-error and subjective estimates. Functionality and anonymity were critical to choosing TG and LIHKG.

Discussions and Limitations

This paper provides novel insights on how protestors in the Honk Kong Anti-ELAB movement dealt with a series of challenges concerning trust in leaderless movements. On the social level, protestors had to determine who they could and could not trust. Second, on an informational level, protestors had to determine what they could trust. Finally, on a media level, protestors had to determine which channels of information could be trusted. In leaderless movements where others may potentially be undercover police officers, protestors developed a series of sophisticated strategies to deal with these challenges (most notably, the emergence of the sentinel program). In the following, we discuss these aspects.

The interaction between social and informational trust Our findings suggested that trust in fellow protesters and diverse information were interconnected as they reinforced each other. Instead of viewing social and informational trust separately, the study revealed a dynamic relationship between the two -facilitated by for example social media.

Social media established a culture online during the movement, facilitating community building. The sense of community helped protesters recognise fellow participants in onsite protests through distinguishing similarities and differences, affecting their judgements on who to trust. Protesters were brought together through their high disposition to trust, social identification, and common characteristics identified from the information spread across the online community. Whereas differences led to suspicions, separating unidentified groups. Meanwhile, protesters' trust towards fellow participants and their social media experiences influenced their evaluations of various information received. Trust in the source, be it a protester, media, or an organisation, was a significant criterion for trusting the information. As

undercovers were discovered, protesters became more alert to fake identities. They started cross-checking to verify the information and its source when they were both on and off the ground (in general, verification through these channels and via the sentinel program prove a strong information environment in the case where no leader can fact-check). Also, as protesters primarily received information via social media, the platforms' affordances contributed to protesters' system trust, influencing the perceived trustworthiness of the information. Trustworthy information online enriched protesters' knowledge about the protest situation, making more precise judgements on who and what information to believe in during the movement. In sum, networked leaderless movements seem more achievable under the interaction between social and informational trust, that is, the engagement between online and offline.

Ebner (2020) captures the idea of online to offline political participation as a strategy used by right-wing extremists. Far-right leaders push right-wing extremists' campaigns on social media and attract people to join the right-wing discussion groups, forming massive right-wing networks online. According to Ebner, social media platforms are the key to right-wing extremists and radicalisation. Meanwhile, recent studies also explained the entwinement of online behaviours and offline participation in protests, indicating social media activities correlate with subsequent large-scale coordination of demonstrations (Greijdanus et al., 2020; Luescher et al., 2021; Reichert, 2021). As such, online and offline interactions seem to have become a trend in social movements, including leaderless movements, today. This appears true for pro-democratic movements such as the HK protest as well as for right-wing movements, as described by Ebner.

The emergence of "sentinels" This study discovered a novel concept called "sentinels", one of the roles played by protesters in the Anti-ELAB movement. Since there was no identified leader or formal information source in the movement, some protesters became "sentinels" to disseminate instant onsite information. Based on respondents' descriptions, the entire operation of "sentinels", from selecting "sentinels" to reporting information as "sentinels", was self-organised. "Sentinels", who did not know each other, needed to collaborate to achieve the goal of providing accurate real-time information. As "sentinels" might face different distractions during their operations, like being arrested by the police or having undercovers invasion, the information dissemination process of "sentinels" depicts a complex information system as described by Albers and Still (2010). In addition, the rise of "sentinels" reflects the decentralised structure of leaderless movements. Since everyone could contribute to disseminating protest information, this bottom-up approach empowers protesters and boosts

morale (Lüders et al., 2021; Riverstone-Newell, 2012). When protesters generally develop good impressions of the movement, they quickly let go of their guard and trust others. Yet, this can be risky because it becomes harder for protesters to recognise each other's real identities. Hence, "sentinels" are a unique feature that only appears in modern leaderless movements, and its effects on trust building are worth further exploration. As described above, this also mirrors information-theoretic verification via independent sources (Bovens & Hartman, 2004).

The era of information-savvy protesters In environments filled with diverse information, like the Anti-ELAB movement, developing ways to identify trustworthy information and resist disinformation is of unprecedented importance. One notable point from the findings was the cross-checking technique adopted by protesters to verify the information received. The idea of cross-checking, namely source dependency, has been discussed broadly in epistemology and philosophy studies (e.g., Fitelson, 2003; Shogenji, 2006). Judging the information's reliability based on comparing multiple sources relates to a principle of Bayesian coherentism, which argues coherence is truth conducive. According to Lewis (1946), the sources of evidence are highly reliable when independently produced reports turn out to be coherent. Therefore, protest information reported by multiple independent sources, be it different media outlets or separate individuals, shows content consistency, enhancing the reliability of the information during the movement.

The sampling method and unique population warrants some consideration. Participants had similar backgrounds, and as such the sample group does not represent the entire movement population. While they differ demographically, the interviewees all have in common that they were quite involved in the protests, and all had the means and opportunities to relocate to the United Kingdom because of their involvement. This means that we must be careful when considering whether to or not we can generalise their experiences to those of other protesters in the movement. Additionally, Walker et al. (2023) show that individual characteristics of HK protesters such sensitivity bias and intersubjectivity may influence respondents' social trust and willingness to express their radical views. As we do not measure these characteristics, we cannot say if our participants were outliers on these aspects.

Related to this, the lessons for leaderless movements discussed in this paper also needs to be seen in the Hong Kong context. While instances like the Sentinel initiative is a core insight from the paper, similar information structures may not arise in other leaderless movements. For example, Hong Kong is a wealthy country with high levels of access to electronic resources, which influences the types of responses that protesters can develop to get reliable information. As such, the challenge of acquiring reliable information may be different in other socio-cultural

or economic contexts. While the characteristics of the participants and the movement itself are unique to the ELAB movement, the lessons on social trust, the desire for finding pathways to reliable information in contexts with no formal information structures, and the use of social cues to estimate informants may be broader ambitions that manifest in different ways given other affordances and limitations. As such, the interviews illustrate broad ambitions that happen to manifest in a specific way for the HK ELAB movement. Future studies should look to other leaderless movements to explore whether the underlying ambitions (and potentially strategies) are found elsewhere.

Besides, findings showed that protesters generated an array of criteria to evaluate the information and social media platforms during their judgements in building informational trust. Protesters' sensitivity towards information reflects the need to be information-savvy when participating in networked leaderless movements.

Future research suggestions

Despite the theoretical contributions, there are potential areas of improvement for future studies. One limitation is lacking generalisability. Due to the small sample size, the findings could not represent all protesters participating in the Anti-ELAB movement. Protesters playing various roles had different motivations, expectations, and protest experiences, thus making different trust-related judgements. This research can be extended by interviewing more protesters with diverse involvement levels and comparing trust-related decisions from different types of protesters to strengthen validity and reliability. Also, the study's interviewees were frequent social media users, while some protesters may not be, which may demonstrate different system trust and information receiving patterns, influencing protesters' trust in diverse information. Meanwhile, the findings were specific to the HK Anti-ELAB movement protesters. Future studies may investigate different types of trust involved and elements affecting protesters' trust-building process in other leaderless movements worldwide and further examine how current research findings might vary across various leaderless movements. Moreover, technical limitations related to conducting online interviews, such as time lag and intermittent voices due to poor Internet connection, can be avoided by conducting face-to-face interviews if there are no geographical and safety constraints. Yet, such direct interviews would be challenging as the research topic is sensitive.

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