



# Hangin together or not? Impacts of social media use and organisational membership on individual and collective political actions

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## Abstract

Do social media help individuals without organisational memberships to engage more in politics or do they only facilitate political participation for those already involved? We examine how social media use and organisational membership jointly affect participation. Comparative surveys in Hong Kong and Taipei reveal that information sharing and virtual political engagement on social media mobilised users to engage in collective political actions. The influence of social media on individual-based participation is conditional on organisational membership, as reflected by the number of organisations joined. Organisational membership moderates the relationship between social media use and political behaviours differently in Hong Kong and Taipei.

## Keywords

Social media, political participation, organisational membership, Hong Kong, Taipei

## Introduction

People participate in politics either in isolation or collectively. As Benjamin Franklin famously said, ‘We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately’. In fact, not all political actions are collectively based. Researchers have distinguished between two modes

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of political participation according to the number of participants involved. One mode refers to individual-based political actions, such as voting and contacting the media or government officials, whereas the other involves collective political activities, such as joining protests and demonstrations (Ha et al., 2013; Towner, 2013; Weber, 2003). Although both types of political actions aim at influencing policy outcomes or authorities' decision-making processes, mobilising these political activities demands different levels of resources and generates varying degrees of conflict between the participants and counter-participants who hold opposing political views (Verba et al., 1971).

Informed by the growing body of literature on the political implications of social media (Gervais, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), this article examines the extent to which social media motivates people to participate in individual and collective political actions. We also investigate how the political impacts of social media use are conditioned by people's existing collective resources, such as their level of organisational membership. The literature provides two theoretical routes explicating the relationship between organisational membership and the political impact of media and communication. Communication infrastructure theory (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006) proposes that the political impacts of new media use are more impressive for those who are already politically active as organisation members or have larger interpersonal networks (Gervais, 2015; Scheufele and Eveland, 2001). However, Neuman (2001) maintains that social media have established new political forces that will become an explicit and crucial channel of mobilisation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 739) proposes a 'logic of connective action', through which any collective action is mobilised and organised via new media platforms without building on any existing social organisation or partisanship-based manipulation or support.

With these theoretical underpinnings, we first review two types of political participation (i.e. individual versus collective political actions). We then review how previous studies have explained the relationship between various dimensions of social media use and political actions and the intellectual debates regarding whether organisational membership makes the political implications of social media more impressive. We also explain the research contexts of the study (Hong Kong and Taiwan). These are developed societies with high penetration rates of social media. We answer the research questions and test the research hypotheses by analysing data from a comparative survey implemented in Hong Kong and Taipei and then discuss the implications of the findings.

## **Categorising participation: Individual versus collective political activities**

Political participation provides people with opportunities 'to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond' (Verba et al., 1995: 37). Such participatory behaviours are categorised according to multiple dimensions (Verba et al., 1971). Scholars have documented these two types of political participation. For example, contributing to an electoral campaign and contacting government officials and the media are regarded as individual political participation, whereas joining a rally or a demonstration is considered collective political participation (Aars and Strømsnes, 2007; Ha et al., 2013; Weber, 2003).

Rather than political participation being treated as a unidimensional concept, individual political activities should be differentiated from collective ones. First, participants in the two modes of political action experience different levels of social interaction from those who do not participate in that specific political activity or from holders of opposing political views. Verba et al. (1971: 14) specified that the difference between individual and collective political activities was the extent to which 'individuals [were] opposed by counterparticipants'. Ha et al. (2013) proposed that individual-based political action 'requires people to organize their thoughts before acting', whereas

collective actions ‘go beyond any individual’s control’ (2013: 525). Pattie and Johnston (2009) argued that collective political actions are more cost-demanding and immune to counter-participants or disagreement for individuals who have already participated in such collective actions. The counter-participants would act as a positive stimulus, reminding these experienced participants of the importance of their participation and reinforcing their stance (Pattie and Johnston, 2009). Similarly, McLeod et al. (1999) distinguished opinions expressed in public situations from those expressed in private, informal political talk because public-based opinions are driven by people’s perceptions of the general opinion climate; such situations encompass more than an individual’s existing political predispositions.

Second, individual and collective political participation differ in the costs and resources required to perform political actions. The media are the primary providers of political information through which citizens become informed, deliberate with others and finally reach a basic agreement on social facts (Swanson, 2000). This agreement serves as a resource for further political action. When the Internet began to gain popularity in the 1990s, the predicted effects of its use were unclear. More recently, Kershaw (2010) argued that new media would only facilitate political actions of already mobilised groups (i.e. those with more and pre-existing organisational memberships). However, Neuman (2001) suggested that new media provide alternative channels for information access and form new social alignments by overcoming the barriers of time and space. Inspired by the inconclusiveness of the existing studies on the role of communication practices in political participation, our study investigated the extent to which the two types of political participation are shaped by two intertwining factors: the dimensions of social media use and the existing collective resources of organisational membership.

## **Social media, organisational membership and political participation**

### *The political implications of social media use*

Social media are platforms on which users can join live chats, upload videos, send messages, maintain blogs, form discussion groups and share files (boyd and Ellison, 2007). The various dimensions of Internet use lead to different types of civic and political engagement (Moy et al., 2005). On the basis of prior work (Zhang and Lin, 2014), the present study identified four dimensions of social media use: (1) information exchange and instrumental use ‘for information and civic purposes, utility oriented, often work-related’ information searching behaviours (Brandtzæg, 2010: 952); (2) relational and social networking use; (3) recreational or entertainment use; and (4) social media-based political activities. Specifically, social media-based political activities have been examined by several studies on government–citizen interactions via new media, particularly virtual political engagement via social media (Bode, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011).

Kriesi (2008) argued that the role of media in politics has become increasingly crucial as party control over voters has declined; and a rich body of literature has attempted to explain how individuals engage in politics via new media and social media (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2010). However, most existing studies have either not identified the dimensions of social media use or not distinguished between individual and collective political actions. Numerous studies have suggested that online social networking behaviours are positively correlated with both individual and collective civic and political engagement. For example, using social media for news and information was positively associated with civic participation, such as engaging in community-based volunteering and fundraising, as well as political participation, such as attending public hearings and joining boycotts (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). People who participated in political

activities on Facebook by following a candidate's page or posting a politics-related status on their personal Facebook pages were also more likely to serve as volunteers and sign petitions (Vitak et al., 2011). However, Kim et al. (2013) suggested that recreational use was negatively associated with offline political participation, such as attending public hearings, contacting the media or attending political rallies. Because the Internet has provided various channels for political participation, Hao et al. (2014) extended the research scope to online participation such as online opinion surveys, online voting, posting comments on political blogs and online debating. They compared news consumption behaviours on conventional media with social media and found that news usage via conventional media was not associated with online or offline political participation, whereas using social networking sites for news was significantly related to both online and offline political and civic engagement.

Our study considers that failing to identify the 'conflict dimension of political participation' (Verba, et al., 1971: 9) – whether political participation is conducted by individuals or groups – prevents understanding of how people develop their participation via social media. Bennett et al. (2008) suggested that as people have enjoyed the growing availability of media tools for personal digital communication the cost of action has lowered, challenging assumptions regarding collective action. Therefore, developing large-scale collective actions no longer requires formal organisation and leadership (Bennett et al., 2008; Lupia and Sin, 2003). To further address such lacunae, our study examines the role of organisational membership in light of the relationship between social media use and political participation.

### *Social media use and organisational membership*

The literature on the role of organisational membership in political participation is divided. Certain researchers believe that networks formed by voluntary members are crucial to recruitment (Verba et al., 1995) because individuals can use these networks to channel political actions. Communication infrastructure theory might explain the role of organisational membership in the media-politics nexus (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). According to this theory, access to the storytelling resources of communities, such as organisational membership networks, is an important factor in civic and political engagement. As Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006: 173) explained, 'when embedded in a neighbourhood environment where key community storytellers encourage each other to talk about the neighbourhood, individual residents are more likely to belong to their community, to have a strong sense of collective efficacy, and to participate in civic actions'. In light of this framework, we infer that the political impacts of social media use would be greater if someone could benefit from such rich collective resources. Kershaw (2010: 425) reported that recruitment for political participation required a 'resource-gathering stage' in which income, education and strong party identification increased the possibility of political involvement. Scheufele et al. (2004) found that political discussion based on volunteer groups facilitated the expression of opinions and the dissemination of hard news. In addition, organisational membership offers resources and skills for public forms of participation (Scheufele and Eveland, 2001) such as demonstrations, rallies and collective petitions. Membership in an organisation facilitates the political impact of existing media use by fostering interpersonal information exchanges and sharing collective resources (Gervais, 2015).

Other studies have proposed that new media can empower otherwise inactive and marginalised people. New media can 'bring new issues to the fore and reorganise traditional political allegiances' (Neuman, 2001: 317). We argue that the effect of associational membership on political participation also depends on the type of participation. As defined by Verba et al. (1971), the 'level of corporation' is sensitive to the outcome of the participation; when this outcome is particularised, a

large corporate group of people is less likely to engage actively in it. When the political context does not encourage political participation and membership in organisations, alternative media plays a substantial role as a venue for political expression. In such circumstances, the mobilising role of social media use is larger for those who belong to few or no organisations. Such a case was advanced by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) with the 'logic of connective action', which posits that personalised content shared across new media networks facilitates Internet-based social movements, particularly when the social media-based multimedia content can quickly announce an event to larger audiences and thus facilitate behavioural outcomes. The '15M Demonstration', which began on 15 May 2011 at the Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid, Spain, is an example of the logic of connective action. Thousands of grassroots protestors gathered at the Square and argued that they were ignored by Spain's political class, whereas the local newspaper reported that the protest was triggered by the high unemployment rate and poor global economy.<sup>1</sup> The protest and movement were mobilised using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The protest participants were younger, more highly educated and less likely to be members of formal organisations; the extensive use of digital media and interpersonal networks formed during the event assisted organisations without much experience in mobilising the protest (Anduiza et al., 2013).

We agree with Scheufele et al. (2004: 331) that 'interpersonal communication among citizens contributes significantly to their ability or willingness to extract meaningful information from traditional news sources'. The present study focuses on how the different dimensions of social media use, including interpersonal and networking-related communication practices, interact with membership in the offline world and generate political outcomes. Whereas political participation can be differentiated as either collective or individual, the political impact of media use depends on whether the foundations of a certain political action exist. Hence, the present study argues that organisational membership, specifically participation in volunteer organisations, serves as a moderator for the association between social media use and the two types of political participation. Thus, we pose the following hypotheses:

*H1: The information and instrumental use of social media (H1a), the social networking use of social media (H1b) and social-media-based political activities (H1c) are positively related to individual-based political participation, whereas the use of social media for entertainment (H1d) is negatively related to individual political participation.*

*H2: The information and instrumental use of social media (H2a), the social network use of social media (H2b) and social-media-based political activities (H2c) are positively related to collective political participation, whereas the use of social media for entertainment (H2d) is negatively related to collective political participation.*

Because previous studies have reported inconclusive evidence regarding the joint effect of social media use and organisational membership, two research questions (RQs), rather than hypotheses, are proposed, the first of which is as follows:

*RQ1: To what extent are the relationships stipulated in H1 and H2 moderated by the level of organisational membership?*

The present study applies a comparative survey conducted in Hong Kong and Taipei, cities with high levels of economic development where people enjoy relatively high freedom to organise collective actions. However, the two cities have different political contexts. Hong Kong is a democratising society (Lee, 2009) where the direct election of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong

Special Administrative Region has historically not been actualised. Lee (2009) also observed that, in Hong Kong, 'conservative politicians and government officials in fact [had] often argued against quickening the process of democratization because the Hong Kong citizenry [was] "not mature" enough ... democratization at too quick a pace [would] lead to the rise of irrational populism' (2009: 384). By contrast, Taiwan is considered to have transformed successfully into a democratic society, and its people enjoy both political rights and civil liberties (Hermanns, 2009). Hence, we propose a second research question to explore the contextual differences of the two cities:

*RQ2: To what extent do the relationships stipulated in RQ1 differ between Hong Kong and Taipei?*

## Method

### Sampling procedure

Comparative surveys ( $n = 637$ ) using self-administered paper questionnaires were implemented in six major universities in Hong Kong and Taipei in 2012, as the younger generation is among the most wired group and includes active social media users. Through multistage cluster sampling, four government-funded universities in Hong Kong and two public universities in Taipei were selected, with 10 schools and colleges randomly chosen from those universities. Within each selected school or college, two course programmes were randomly selected. Within each programme, two classes containing more than 30 students were randomly selected. For the selected classes, permission to conduct the survey was obtained in advance from the course instructors. All the students in the classes were invited to participate in the survey. Students voluntarily finished the questionnaires in the class setting.

The fieldwork in Taipei began in late March 2012 and lasted for two weeks. The survey generated 336 valid cases, with a response rate of 83.88% according to the American Association for Public Opinion Research response rate (AAPOR RR6). Of the respondents who submitted valid responses, 179 (53.27%) were female. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years; the average age was 20.49 years ( $SD = 2.11$ ). The fieldwork in Hong Kong was conducted between October and November of 2012. The same sampling procedure was followed, and 301 surveys were completed (AAPOR RR6 = 82.65%). In this sample, 66.78% of the respondents were female. The respondents ranged in age from 17 to 47; the average age was 21.90 years ( $SD = 3.33$ ).<sup>2</sup>

### Measurements

*Dependent variables: Political participation.* We separately measured two typical instances of individual participation; the first type was voting, which was measured using a dichotomous item. In Hong Kong, the question addressed participation in the election of the Legislative Council (40.74% indicated that they had voted). In Taipei, the question addressed voting turnout for the 2012 presidential election. Of the eligible voters ( $\geq 20$  years), 72.96% reported that they had voted. Another type of individual political participation is contacting. Political participation through contacting those in power was measured by examining how often the participants contacted government personnel, contacted the press through letters to the editor, made phone calls to broadcast media, or sought assistance from higher officials in the work unit. Each item consisted of a 4-point scale ranging from *have never done* to *always*. The item that examined whether the participants sought assistance from higher officials at their work unit was drawn from Shi (1997), who argued that political participation should include activities in which citizens face their supervisors in the

decision-making process. Shi (1997) focused on mainland China; however, Kuan and Lau (2002) adopted the measurement in Hong Kong as well as Taiwan. The three items were averaged to create a new variable indicating the level of individual political participation. Regarding collective political participation, collective demonstrations or protests are frequently held in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. We measured two typical types of public political actions (signing petitions and joining demonstrations or rallies) by using 4-point scales ranging from *never* to *always*. We averaged the two items into a single variable that indicated the level of collective political participation.

**Moderator: organisational membership.** Following previous studies (Bennett et al., 2008; Gervais, 2015; Rojas et al., 2011), the level of organisational membership indicates the number of organisational types of which individuals were members. Organisational membership was measured by an additive index of nine items based on a respondent's membership in a range of organisations belonging to the following categories: environmental, arts and sports, student organisation, charity, professional, consumer, partisan, religious, and entertainment. In interpreting and evaluating the overall level of organisational membership, the present study followed the practices of Rojas et al. (2011: 700) in which 'a high score implies belonging to different types of organizations'.

**Predictor variables: Social media use.** A list of items to determine social media use was proposed; each item was measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *seldom* to *always* for each. Informational and instrumental use of social media included items such as reading hard news via social media, uploading personally recorded photos or videos of non-recreational current events, and writing blog posts on government or politics. Social networking use of social media was measured using items such as the frequencies of tagging other users (such as through '@username'), visiting friends' personal pages and seeking new friends. The use of social media for entertainment and recreation was gauged using items regarding acts such as reposting or sharing multimedia for entertainment and uploading photos or videos about one's personal life. Finally, social media-based political activities included items such as explicitly expressing opinions on the government and politics via social media and following and interacting with the official social media accounts of government or political institutions. To assess how the level of organisational membership moderated the political impacts of the four types of social media use, four two-way multiplicative interaction terms were generated from measurements of organisational membership and each of the four dimensions of social media use. All the variables used to create the interaction terms were centred before the interaction terms were created.

**Control variables.** In addition to gender and age, we included the following sociodemographic variables and political orientations: monthly household income (measured using a 9-point Likert scale ranging from *below HK\$4,999* to *above HK\$50,000* in Hong Kong and a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *below NT\$35,000* to *above NT\$120,001* in Taipei); interest in politics (measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *no interest at all* to *high interest*); and daily social media use (measured in hours and minutes and converted into minutes). We also measured news media consumption and averaged four 4-point Likert-type scaled items regarding the frequency of consuming political news in the form of television, online video, print newspapers and online text. Table 1 lists all the variables.

We report the zero-order correlations of major constructs in the supplementary material (Tables S1 and Table S2, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com>). The social media use dimensions are positively correlated with both types of political participation. The four dimensions of social media use are weakly or moderately correlated with one another. Although the four usage dimensions are distinct conceptually, active users of one dimension likely use other dimensions as well because

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

|  | Hong Kong (n = 301) |             |                         | Taipei (n = 336) |             |               |
|--|---------------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|---------------|
|  | M                   | SD          | $\alpha$                | M                | SD          | $\alpha$      |
| <b>Individual political participation</b>  | <b>1.47</b>         | <b>0.53</b> | <b>0.71</b>             | <b>1.45</b>      | <b>0.55</b> | <b>0.83</b>   |
| Contacting higher level of government personnel  | 1.37                | 0.62        | 0.68 <sup>1</sup>       | 1.44             | 0.72        | 0.58          |
| Seeking help from the higher officials of your work unit   | 1.38                | 0.63        | 0.54                    | 1.25             | 0.55        | 0.50          |
| Contacting the media   | 1.67                | 0.74        | 0.64                    | 1.66             | 0.85        | 0.62          |
| Voting – LegCo (Hong Kong)   | 40.74%              |             |                         |                  |             |               |
| Voting – 2012 election (Taipei)  |                     |             |                         | 72.96%           |             |               |
| <b>Collective political participation</b>  | <b>1.81</b>         | <b>0.77</b> | <b>r=0.57</b>           | <b>1.58</b>      | <b>0.64</b> | <b>r=0.52</b> |
| Collective petitions   | 1.88                | 0.89        | –                       | 1.68             | 0.79        | –             |
| Demonstrations or rallies  | 1.74                | 0.84        | –                       | 1.48             | 0.69        | –             |
| <b>Social media uses dimension I: Information exchange and instrumental uses</b>                       | <b>2.04</b>         | <b>0.54</b> | <b>0.69</b>             | <b>1.94</b>      | <b>0.52</b> | <b>0.65</b>   |
| Reading hard news via social media   | 2.76                | 0.92        | 0.65                    | 2.70             | 0.92        | 0.62          |
| Repost photos or videos on government or politics  | 2.34                | 0.98        | 0.61                    | 2.20             | 0.97        | 0.58          |
| Uploading photos or videos shot by yourself on non-recreational events                                 | 2.02                | 0.91        | 0.68                    | 1.73             | 0.89        | 0.62          |
| Voting via social media  | 1.75                | 0.78        | 0.68                    | 1.84             | 0.82        | 0.62          |
| Writing blogs on politics, economics, or international relations                                       | 1.71                | 0.80        | 0.65                    | 1.48             | 0.71        | 0.63          |
| Joining topic discussions  | 1.66                | 0.73        | 0.64                    | 1.68             | 0.82        | 0.59          |
| <b>Social media uses dimension II: Socialising</b>   | <b>2.37</b>         | <b>0.47</b> | <b>0.59</b>             | <b>2.44</b>      | <b>0.50</b> | <b>0.61</b>   |
| Leaving messages or tagging others   | 3.01                | 0.84        | 0.57                    | 3.30             | 0.83        | 0.56          |
| Visiting friends' page   | 3.12                | 0.77        | 0.46                    | 3.26             | 0.77        | 0.52          |
| Seeking and adding new friends   | 2.61                | 0.80        | 0.52                    | 2.60             | 0.90        | 0.52          |
| Sending virtual gifts  | 1.37                | 0.60        | 0.60                    | 1.26             | 0.56        | 0.62          |
| Using social networking applications   | 1.76                | 0.76        | 0.52                    | 1.78             | 0.86        | 0.56          |
| <b>Social media uses dimension III: Recreational and entertainment uses</b>                            | <b>2.68</b>         | <b>0.72</b> | <b>0.73</b>             | <b>2.53</b>      | <b>0.80</b> | <b>0.65</b>   |
| Reposting or sharing entertainment or lifestyle-related materials                                      | 2.84                | 0.88        | 0.56                    | 2.66             | 1.02        | 0.53          |
| Writing posts to express personal emotions and lifestyle   | 2.32                | 0.94        | 0.76                    | 2.28             | 1.10        | 0.64          |
| Uploading photos or videos on personal stuffs  | 2.89                | 0.84        | 0.62                    | 2.65             | 1.00        | 0.49          |
| <b>Social media uses dimension IV: Social media-based political activities</b>                         | <b>2.02</b>         | <b>0.67</b> | <b>0.72</b>             | <b>1.98</b>      | <b>0.70</b> | <b>0.74</b>   |
| Posting the political issues on social media and initiating political discussion                       | 2.50                | 0.92        | 0.65                    | 2.66             | 1.01        | 0.73          |
| Expressing opinions on government and politics via social media  | 1.84                | 0.92        | 0.67                    | 1.82             | 0.94        | 0.67          |
| Following or interacting with official social media accounts of governmental or political institutions | 1.73                | 0.80        | 0.66                    | 1.64             | 0.83        | 0.69          |
| Organising non-governmental campaigns or activities via social media                                   | 1.99                | 0.95        | 0.62                    | 1.82             | 0.93        | 0.64          |
| <b>Organisational membership</b>   | <b>3.10</b>         | <b>2.55</b> | <b>0.81<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>2.62</b>      | <b>1.92</b> | <b>0.66</b>   |
| <b>News media uses</b>   | <b>2.71</b>         | <b>0.59</b> | <b>0.62</b>             | <b>2.53</b>      | <b>0.62</b> | <b>0.56</b>   |
| Newspaper  | 2.60                | 1.00        | 0.60                    | 2.43             | 1.04        | 0.47          |



**Table 1.** (Continued)

|                                 | Hong Kong ( <i>n</i> = 301) |      |          | Taipei ( <i>n</i> = 336) |      |          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|----------|--------------------------|------|----------|
|                                 | M                           | SD   | $\alpha$ | M                        | SD   | $\alpha$ |
| TV news                         | 2.50                        | 0.87 | 0.48     | 2.02                     | 0.96 | 0.42     |
| Online news                     | 2.57                        | 0.83 | 0.54     | 2.51                     | 0.94 | 0.50     |
| Radio news                      | 3.17                        | 0.74 | 0.59     | 3.18                     | 0.80 | 0.55     |
| <b>Female</b>                   | 66.78%                      |      |          | 53.27%                   |      |          |
| <b>Age</b>                      | 21.90                       | 3.33 |          | 20.49                    | 2.11 |          |
| <b>Monthly household income</b> | 4.88                        | 2.25 |          | 3.05                     | 1.27 |          |
| <b>Interest in politics</b>     | 2.34                        | 0.76 |          | 2.35                     | 0.79 |          |
| <b>SNS usage time length</b>    | 9.15                        | 4.05 |          | 8.67                     | 3.71 |          |

Note 1: In addition to the  $\alpha$  value for the constructed scale, we reported the  $\alpha$  value for each item. The item  $\alpha$  indicate the  $\alpha$  value for the scale if that particular item is dropped. When the item  $\alpha$  is lower than the scale  $\alpha$ , it indicates that dropping one item would make the scale less reliable and hence this item should be included in the scale. See Acock (2008: 370) for a more detailed discussion.

Note 2: When organisational membership is a count of group membership when each item is coded dichotomously (being a member vs not being a member), Kuder–Richardson coefficient of reliability (KR-20) is reported.

social media are regarded as a multifunctional communication platform. The measurements showed divergent validity.

## Results

We tested the hypotheses by using binary logistic regression (with a dichotomous dependent variable) and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (with a continuous dependent variable). The results are presented in Table 2. Model 1 reports the binary logistic regression coefficients for the Legislative Council voting, and Model 2 reports the OLS regression coefficients for contacting behaviours. The results indicated that none of the dimensions of social media use contributed to the Legislative Council voting. However, political use of social media was positively linked to contacting behaviours (standardised coefficient = 0.16, *s.e.* = 0.050,  $p < 0.01$ ). Model 3 reports collective political participation (such as petitions and demonstrations) in Hong Kong with OLS regression coefficients. The informational use (standardised coefficient = 0.23, *s.e.* = 0.094,  $p < 0.001$ ) and political use of social media (standardised coefficient = 0.32, *s.e.* = 0.067,  $p < 0.001$ ) positively predicted offline collective political participation such as petitions and demonstrations.

In Taipei, Models 4 and 5 report the two types of individual political participation. Model 4 reports the binary logistic regression coefficients for voting in the 2012 presidential election. No dimension of social media use contributed to voting behaviour. However, as shown by the OLS regression coefficients reported in both Models 5 and 6, the online political use of social media (standardised coefficient = 0.23, *s.e.* = 0.067,  $p < 0.001$ ) was correlated with both contacting behaviours and joining petitions and demonstrations (standardised coefficient = 0.27, *s.e.* = 0.072,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Hence, H1a was not supported, as the informational use of social media was not associated with individual political actions. However, H1c (the online political use of social media positively contributed to contacting participation) was supported in both Hong Kong and Taipei. H1b and H1d were not supported, as no statistically significant impacts of social networking or entertainment use of social media were observed for any type of individual political action. In explaining

**Table 2.** The impact of social media usage and organisational membership on political participation in Hong Kong and Taipei.

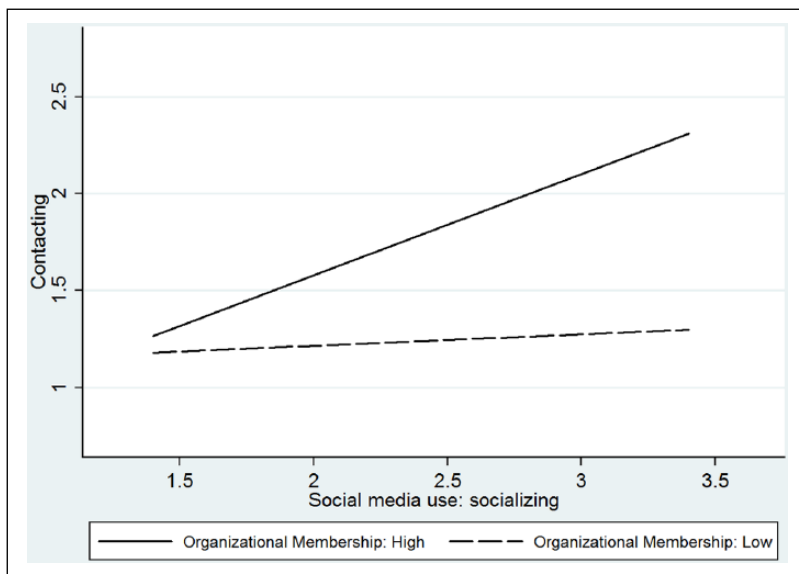
|   | Hong Kong (Models 1, 2 and 3) |                     |                    | Taipei (Models 4, 5 and 6) |                    |                    |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|   | Model 1                       | Model 2             | Model 3            | Model 4                    | Model 5            | Model 6            |
|   | Voting in LegCo election      | Contacting          | Collective actions | Voting in 2012 election    | Contacting         | Collective actions |
| Female  | -0.57*<br>(0.30)              | -0.015<br>(0.056)   | 0.075<br>(0.077)   | 2.48***<br>(0.44)          | -0.060<br>(0.067)  | 0.069<br>(0.073)   |
| Age   | -0.079<br>(0.039)             | 0.00041<br>(0.0076) | -0.096*<br>(0.010) | 0.83<br>(0.10)             | 0.00049<br>(0.016) | 0.18***<br>(0.016) |
| Household income                              | 0.093<br>(0.059)              | 0.026<br>(0.011)    | -0.054<br>(0.015)  | -0.50<br>(0.17)            | -0.061<br>(0.026)  | 0.061<br>(0.028)   |
| Interest in politics                          | 0.15<br>(0.20)                | -0.023<br>(0.037)   | 0.14**<br>(0.051)  | 1.78**<br>(0.33)           | 0.028<br>(0.046)   | 0.059<br>(0.050)   |
| Social media use time length                  | -0.55<br>(0.042)              | 0.080<br>(0.0068)   | -0.052<br>(0.0094) | -0.56<br>(0.060)           | -0.029<br>(0.0087) | 0.14**<br>(0.0094) |
| News media use                                | 0.62*<br>(0.24)               | 0.052<br>(0.044)    | 0.019<br>(0.060)   | -0.23<br>(0.35)            | 0.10<br>(0.054)    | -0.0060<br>(0.059) |
| Membership                                    | 0.10<br>(0.059)               | 0.21***<br>(0.011)  | -0.092<br>(0.015)  | -0.17<br>(0.12)            | 0.093<br>(0.017)   | 0.037<br>(0.019)   |
| Social media use I: Info                      | -0.084<br>(0.38)              | 0.068<br>(0.070)    | 0.23***<br>(0.094) | 0.14<br>(0.58)             | -0.015<br>(0.089)  | 0.14<br>(0.097)    |
| Social media use II: Socializing              | -0.39<br>(0.35)               | 0.094<br>(0.065)    | -0.084<br>(0.090)  | -0.62<br>(0.52)            | 0.096<br>(0.079)   | -0.10<br>(0.086)   |
| Social media use III: Entertainment           | 0.30<br>(0.24)                | 0.036<br>(0.044)    | -0.070<br>(0.060)  | -0.13<br>(0.35)            | -0.14<br>(0.052)   | -0.048<br>(0.057)  |
| Social media use IV: Political activities     | 0.19<br>(0.28)                | 0.16*<br>(0.050)    | 0.32***<br>(0.067) | 0.26<br>(0.45)             | 0.23**<br>(0.067)  | 0.27***<br>(0.072) |
| Social media use I × Membership               | -0.47<br>(0.13)               | 0.10<br>(0.024)     | -0.0081<br>(0.033) | 0.55<br>(0.27)             | -0.088<br>(0.042)  | 0.098<br>(0.046)   |
| Social media use II × Membership              | 0.077<br>(0.13)               | 0.11*<br>(0.024)    | 0.059<br>(0.033)   | -2.14**<br>(0.32)          | 0.19*<br>(0.045)   | -0.072<br>(0.050)  |
| Social media use III × Membership             | -0.054<br>(0.090)             | 0.018<br>(0.016)    | -0.035<br>(0.022)  | 0.78<br>(0.19)             | -0.20*<br>(0.028)  | -0.021<br>(0.032)  |
| Social media use IV × Membership              | 0.054<br>(0.10)               | -0.035<br>(0.018)   | 0.028<br>(0.025)   | 0.078<br>(0.19)            | 0.15<br>(0.030)    | -0.0076<br>(0.033) |
| Collective actions                            | 1.39***<br>(0.24)             | 0.31***<br>(0.042)  | -                  | -0.45<br>(0.45)            | 0.51***<br>(0.061) | -                  |
| Contacting                                    | -0.89*<br>(0.34)              | -                   | 0.28***<br>(0.079) | 0.62<br>(0.51)             | -                  | 0.41***<br>(0.073) |
| LegCo voting (for Hong Kong sample only)      | -                             | -0.12*<br>(0.053)   | 0.18***<br>(0.072) | -                          | -                  | -                  |
| 2012 election voting (for Taipei sample only) | -                             | -                   | -                  | -                          | 0.050<br>(0.076)   | -0.041<br>(0.083)  |
| Observations                                  | 292                           | 292                 | 292                | 196                        | 196                | 196                |
| R <sup>2</sup>                                | .                             | 42.46%              | 48.61%             | .                          | 55.78%             | 63.75%             |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>                       | .                             | 38.89%              | 45.42%             | .                          | 51.56%             | 60.29%             |
| Model F Value                                 | .                             | 11.89***            | 15.25***           | .                          | 13.21***           | 18.41***           |

**Table 2.** (Continued)

|                | Hong Kong (Models 1, 2 and 3) |            |                    | Taipei (Models 4, 5 and 6) |            |                    |
|----------------|-------------------------------|------------|--------------------|----------------------------|------------|--------------------|
|                | Model 1                       | Model 2    | Model 3            | Model 4                    | Model 5    | Model 6            |
|                | Voting in LegCo election      | Contacting | Collective actions | Voting in 2012 election    | Contacting | Collective actions |
| Log-likelihood | -173.52                       | .          | .                  | -85.81                     | .          | .                  |
| Chi-square     | 49.16***                      | .          | .                  | 57.17***                   | .          | .                  |

Standardised coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; missing values were replaced by means.  
 \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Figure 1.** Predicting individual-based political participation (contacting) in Hong Kong.

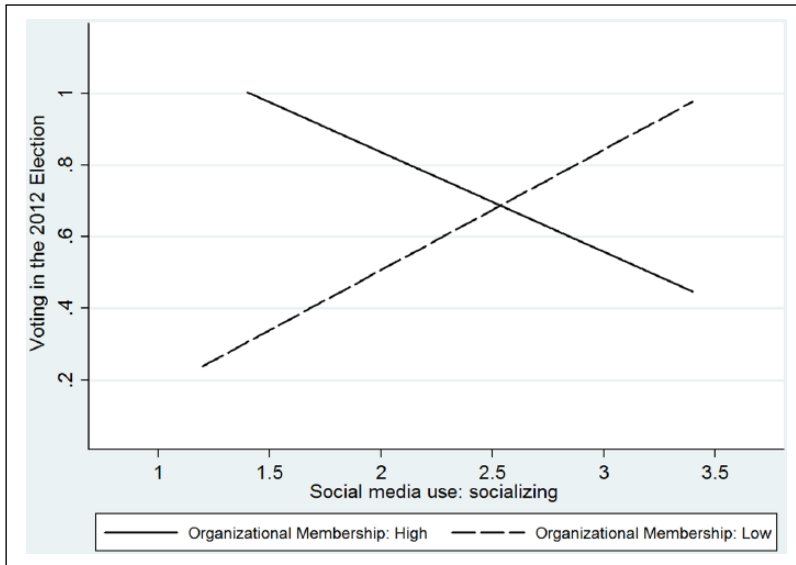


collective political participation, H2a was supported in the Hong Kong sample; the informational use of social media was positively associated with collective action. H2c (the positive relationship between the online political use of social media and collective actions) was supported in both Hong Kong and Taipei. However, neither H2b nor H2d was supported. Neither social networking nor entertainment use had a statistically significant impact on collective political actions.

Regarding our research questions, our findings suggest that organisational membership serves as a moderator of the relationship between social media use and political actions. In Hong Kong, the social networking use of social media (sending messages to friends, visiting friends’ personal pages and seeking and adding friends) has a larger impact on contacting behaviours when someone has a higher level of organisational membership (Model 2, Social Media Use II  $\times$  Membership, standardised coefficient = 0.11, s.e. = 0.024,  $p < 0.05$ ). The interaction effect is presented in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

In Taipei, the links between the socialisation use of social media and voting are stronger for those with lower levels of membership (Model 4, Social Media Use II  $\times$  Membership, standardised coefficient = -2.14, s.e. = 0.32,  $p < 0.01$ ). The interaction effect is presented in Figure 2. Finally,

**Figure 2.** Predicting individual-based political participation, i.e. voting in the 2012 election, in Taipei.



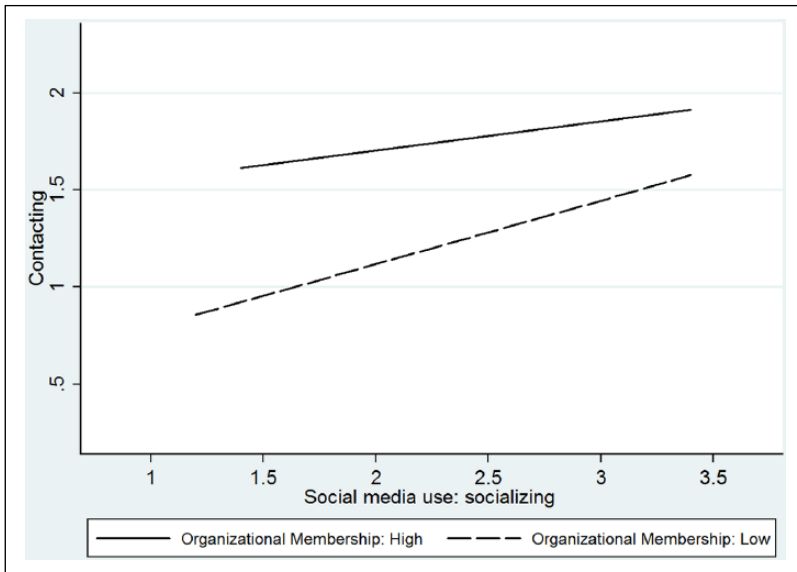
the relationship between the socialisation use of social media and contacting behaviours is stronger for those with lower levels of organisational membership (Model 5, Social Media Use II  $\times$  Membership, standardised coefficient = 0.19, s.e. = 0.045,  $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, the relationship between the entertainment use of social media and contacting behaviours is stronger for those with lower levels of organisational membership (Model 5, Social Media Use III  $\times$  Membership, standardised coefficient =  $-0.20$ , s.e. = 0.028,  $p < 0.05$ ). These two interaction effects are presented in Figures 3 and 4.

## Discussion and conclusions

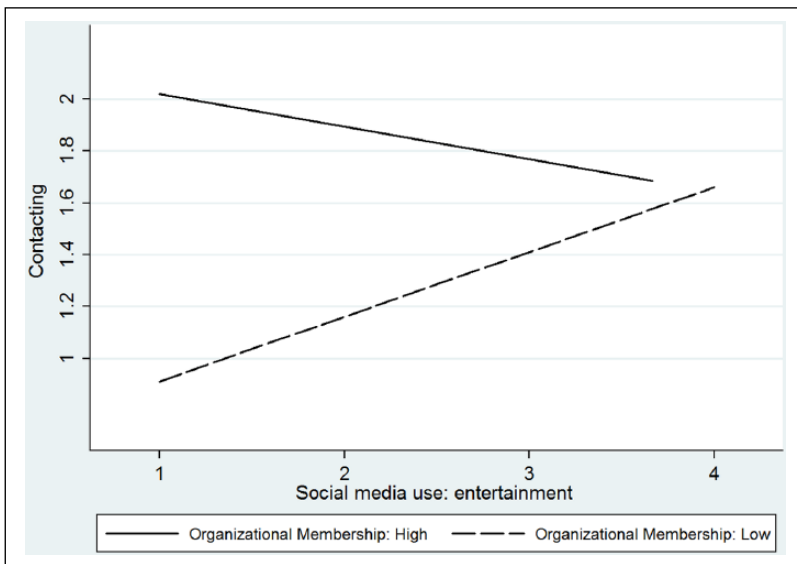
The present study makes three contributions to the understanding of the political implications of social media. First, it adds new evidence to the growing body of literature regarding whether social media isolates people from public life or encourages people to participate more in politics. Although several studies over the past two decades have found that new media might increase people's interpersonal trust and civic and political participation, the effect size was quite small (Bimber, 1999; Boulianne, 2009). Although none of the dimensions of social media use contributed to institutionalised political participation such as voting in an election, our results show that contacting behaviours and offline collective political actions are mobilised via information sharing and virtual political engagement on social media. Social media use, particularly social media-based political activities, provides a wide scope for younger generations to engage in both individual and collective politics in the offline world.

Second, our study shows that political engagement results from both online communication practices and offline collective resources. Specifically, our findings highlight the moderating role of organisational membership in the relationship between political participation and two types of social media use (socialisation and entertainment). The political implications of the socialisation and entertainment uses of social media indicate that new channels through which people can

**Figure 3.** Predicting individual-based political participation, i.e. contacting, in Taipei.



**Figure 4.** Predicting individual-based political participation, i.e. contacting, in Taipei.



engage in politics are gaining ground in the Web 2.0 era. Shah et al. (2007) proposed that traditionally non-political behaviours, such as recreation, entertainment and fashion, could all be imbued with political meanings. Similarly, our findings suggest that the non-political aspects of social media could have implications for political actions as well.

Third, our study shows different moderation patterns for organisational membership between Hong Kong and Taipei. The most substantial difference was that, in Hong Kong, the effect of social

media use on contacting behaviours in individual-level political participation was stronger for those with higher levels of organisational membership (see Figure 1). The reverse was true in Taipei, where social networking on social media had stronger impacts on both voting (see Figure 2) and contacting (see Figure 3) among those with lower levels of organisational membership. One possible explanation for this pattern resides in how political cultures and the purpose of political actions differ in the two societies. In our study, the pattern of how organisational membership moderates the relationship between social media use and political behaviours in Hong Kong is consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Lee, 2012). Previous studies have determined that interpersonal political discussion was more strongly associated with calling in to radio talk shows among those who encountered higher levels of disagreement in daily conversation in Hong Kong (Lee, 2012: 556). Our study demonstrates that social media use has a higher effect on contacting behaviours among those who have a higher level of organisational membership (see Figure 1). Here, one possible explanation is that a higher level of organisational membership indicates people joining a larger number of organisations, which in turn indicates a higher level of heterogeneity (McLeod et al., 1999; Rojas et al., 2011). Such diversity of opinion can lead to increased disagreement. Our results show that when one encounters a higher level of disagreement in the offline world, the socialising use of social media encourages a person to conduct political actions individually. In Taiwan, the ideological differences between political parties are substantial, in contrast with their counterparts in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, calling a phone-in radio programme is regarded as a non-position-taking political activity; this type of programme is not intended for people expressing one-sided political opinions (Lee, 2012). By contrast, call-in programmes in Taiwan demonstrate a high level of partisanship and party bias (Chang and Lo, 2007); for callers with strong political interests, calling in to the phone-in programmes is regarded as a position-taking political activity. Our results suggest that in Taipei, people with lower levels of organisational membership use social media as a resource for advancing such position-taking participation (such as voting and contacting the media to express political views). Our results extend those of earlier studies, which state that the mobilising role of social media is dependent on existing collective resources (e.g. Gervais, 2015; Scheufele and Eveland, 2001) or that community-based storytelling systems facilitate political engagement (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). As illustrated by the interaction effects shown in Figures 2–4, the socialisation and entertainment uses of social media serve as crucial facilitators of individual political participation when a person lacks offline resources (as indicated by the lower levels of organisational membership); the dashed lines representing cases with lower levels of organisational membership appear to have a larger slope. This pattern provides empirical support for the ‘logic of connective actions’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), which states that use of social media facilitates political participation that is not based on existing collective resources. Social media could empower people who do not have organisational memberships and mobilise them to participate in political activities.

Several interesting questions remain unanswered. For example, the non-significant direct effects of social media use on voting behaviours, both in Taipei and in Hong Kong, contradict the optimistic view proposed by several previous studies, in which social media facilitates political participation. One possible reason is that politicians in Hong Kong and Taipei have made inadequate use of social media to bolster their campaign images. Among the few studies that have analysed campaign blogs and websites during Taiwan’s 2008 legislative election, Wang (2010) found that campaign blogs (a means of two-way communication) and websites (a means of one-way communication) were used negatively (to attack opponents) rather than to emphasise political policies or provide substantial information concerning particular campaign issues. We also acknowledge that a cross-sectional research design does not facilitate testing the causal relationship between social media use and participatory behaviours. A longitudinal panel study could provide further insights.

Finally, our study focuses on university students, who are the most active Internet users, so we acknowledge that the conclusions should not be overgeneralised to the entire population. However, we believe that the 'habits and preferences of today's young people will give us a glimpse of what the future will be like' (Zukin et al., 2006: 48). In sum, the study reveals how online social networking and offline organisational resource interact with each other and produce different types of political action. It contributes to existing knowledge of the political potential of social media as a unique channel for people to engage in politics.

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### Notes

1. For more information on Spain's 15M Demonstration, see 'Protesters Rally in Madrid Despite Ban' by Robert Mackey, published in *The New York Times* on 18 May 2011 (available at [http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/protesters-rally-in-madrid-despite-ban/?\\_r=0](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/protesters-rally-in-madrid-despite-ban/?_r=0)).
2. According to the 2015 report issued by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the percentage of female students ranged from 49% to 50% in the previous five years (see <http://www.edu.tw/pages/detail.aspx?Node=3973&Page=20272&WID=31d75a44-efff-4c44-a075-15a9eb7aecdf#a>). According to the official statistics of the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong, the percentage of female students ranged from 53% to 54% over the past decades (see <http://cdcf.ugc.edu.hk/cdcf/searchStatSiteReport.do>).
3. To present the interaction effect empirically, Figures 1–4 show the relationships between the predicted values of political participation (y axis) and the particular dimension of social media use (x axis) for those who had higher levels of organisational membership (one standard deviation above the mean) and lower levels of organisational membership (one standard deviation below the mean). The predicted values were calculated from the unstandardised raw regression coefficients of all the predictors included in the models.

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