

“We shall not flag or fail, we shall go on to the end”: Hashtag Activism in Hong Kong Protests

Focusing on the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong, this article presents an analysis of Twitter posts adopting the hashtags #antiELAB, #NoChinaExtradition and #HongKongProtests. The analysis explores the public narrative among the collective identity of Hongkongers opposing the extradition bill as events unfolded during mid-2019 in Hong Kong. To do so, we adopt Bhatia’s (2015) multi-perspective framework for the Discourse of Illusion, which takes a three-prong approach to the study of argument construction and establishing legitimacy. Specifically, through the interrelated components of 1) historicity, 2) linguistic and semiotic action, and 3) social impact, the dimensions of the hashtag narrative that emerged on Twitter were explored.

Keywords: Hashtag activism; Discourse of Illusion; Twitter; Hong Kong Protests; Social media discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

The hot months of June-September 2019 in Hong Kong have come to be characterised as the summer of discontent. Both planned marches and spontaneous outbreaks of violence around the city over a proposed extradition bill¹ by Chief Executive (CE) Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor’s government spurred into action a feverish fight for the future. The proposed amendments to the extradition bill would allow transfer of fugitives to any jurisdiction with which there is currently no treaty, including China, and were met with resistance by a considerable section of the city’s population, particularly its youth. Consequently, resistance to the proposed amendments has taken shape most notably in the form of a million-strong non-violent march on 9 June 2019 and a similar two-million people march on 16 June 2019, the latter becoming the largest such demonstration in the history of Hong Kong.

As a city, Hong Kong exhibits a unique history being a former British colony, which was returned to China as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) in 1997 under the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’. Over the years, however, segments of the city have demonstrated growing societal frustration over its fragmenting identity. Fears of Hong Kong losing its economic importance to larger cities in China, and that linguistically, “English is no longer Hong Kong’s special weapon... [as] mainland China integrates itself more into the international system” (Ying, 2014), has given rise to a bifurcation in the cultural sentiments of certain sections of Hong Kong and Mainland China, extending to the interpretation of Hong Kong’s key tool of distinction – the Basic Law, its mini-constitution. Born of the belief that

¹ Since the completion of this paper, Carrie Lam’s government has formally withdrawn the bill (<https://time.com/5668232/hong-kong-extradition-bill-carrie-lam-withdraw/>)

the proposed amendments to the extradition bill may impinge on the Basic Law, the 2019 Hong Kong protests generated a narrative through social media that stood in direct opposition to official representations of the bill. This paper will therefore be focusing on the two primary narratives that shaped views of the bill, put forward by two distinct discourse clans: anti-bill protesters and the HKSAR Government.

The protests attracted attention, particularly from those opposing the bill, across various social media platforms inclusive of Twitter, Telegram, Facebook and Instagram. The slogan that reverberated in mainstream media and often flyers associated with the protests was ‘No China Extradition’, which morphed into the hashtag variations #NoChinaExtradition, #antiELAB and #HongKongProtests across social media platforms. Through tweets using these hashtags, we explore the protester narrative materialising from the voices on the ground. In addition, to explore the Governmental narrative, we focus on speeches given by the Chief Executive between June-September 2019, the period that marks the major developments during the protests. Employing Bhatia’s (2015) framework for the Discourse of Illusion, we examine the competing narratives of the protesters and the government as they engage with key issues of the protest, namely Hong Kong identity, actions of the police, and actions of the government in general.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of social media in political communication and participation has become impossible to ignore. The simplicity of its use has facilitated a sharp rise in “grassroots participation, allowing individuals to express their opinions more openly and freely” (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneaux, and Zheng 2014, 613). This has been acknowledged as being particularly relevant in relation to youth with more independent opportunities to engage with political issues and discussion (Xenos, Vromen, and Loader 2014). Of particular note, social media has led to the emergence of protest identities, forged through ideological beliefs. When such identities emerge, the concept of collective identity must then also be considered, and re-calibrated to fit within the contemporary architecture of a new media-driven society.

2.1 Collective Identity and Connective Action

Emerging from the work of Melucci (1995), collective identity refers to a group identity founded on shared experiences, values, interests and solidarity. Melucci (1995) outlines that a collective identity is more than simply a ‘thing’ but must be seen as a system of relations and representations. New media technologies represent an ideal domain within which to witness the development and growth of collective identity via platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In relation to this, in a study focusing on the Tunisian revolution, Breuer, Landman and Farquhar (2015) suggest a direct link between the emergence of collective identities on social media and the development of specific protest identities. This is due to the motivation for protest participation derived from the collective identity, based upon in-group solidarity and an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ mentality.

It is important, however, to avoid making too rigid a distinction between ‘types’ of online or real-world activism (Miller 2017). For example, social media-based technological activities such as retweeting, ‘liking’, or using specific hashtags can be interpreted as a late modern form of virtual activism (Papacharissi 2010). That is, these new forms of political communication establish a bridge to political activism, where “the communication itself becomes a form of activism” (Miller 2017, 254). Online activism has been variably described as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’, as well as made reference to as ‘micro-contributions’, ‘micro-activism’, or ‘sub-activism’, for example. Similarly, ‘hashtag activism’ (e.g. Yang 2016) falls into this category, and is most pertinent to the current study with the hashtags under study, exemplifying the bridge between traditional (e.g. images of real involvement of citizens in the protests) and digital activism (e.g. covering the protests and the broader issue to expand issue and consolidate collective identity). In this way, hashtags can play an important role in building viral communities and strengthening the in-group solidarity of those aligned with the narratives of these communities (cf. Guo and Saxton 2014).

This leads to the shift from the idea of a collective identity to the more contemporary conceptualisation of a connective identity, leading to connective action. As discussed previously and confirmed by Ekström and Shehata (2018, 741), “digital networks and social media add new dynamics to social movements and activism” with a marked expansion in the opportunities available for citizens to engage in public discourse around contentious political issues such as the extradition bill in Hong Kong. The concept, or logic, of ‘connective action’ was put forward by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) to account for action based on the sharing of ideas, plans, ideologies, images and other aspects among networks of individuals who may be disparate in time and space, but connected regardless of any geographic distance. This notion of connective action is of significance to the present study because even though the many Hong Kongers posting on Twitter alongside the three hashtags may not necessarily have physically been on the streets protesting (although clearly many were), the act of posting contributed to the collective identity that emerged as resistance to the extradition bill through a demonstration of connective action.

2.2 Social Media Narratives and Subjective Ideologies

Twitter, in particular, has emerged as a significant platform for collaborative storytelling and news sharing. There already exists a plethora of valuable work documenting Twitter’s success in acting as a catalyst for social movements across the globe including Black Lives Matter (Freelon et al. 2016); Occupy Wall Street (Penney and Dadas 2014); and the Egyptian uprisings (Bhatia 2018), among others. Research in this area has helped explore how social media can resist dominant narratives proliferated by traditional media, allowing more intensive debate and engagement through personalisation of issues. This has also, to some extent, led to the invasion of traditional mass media, by social media. For example, Jackson and Welles (2015) illustrate how minority voices have used Twitter to post counter-narratives challenging police action, and how these voices are ultimately incorporated into reporting by traditional media. As Hand (2011) explains, Twitter’s effectiveness lies in the reach it offers in interaction, and the associated potential for critique. Part of this reach lies in the potential for amplification,

evidenced for example by retweets, which can result in both the recruitment of support towards a particular narrative, effectively allowing participation on part of those not physically on the scene, but also redundancy in terms of original content (cf. Penny and Dadas 2014).

Twitter represents the egalitarian democratization of information and opinion sharing. The very nature of the platform results in audiences more likely to feel empowered and participate within different sociocultural contexts. This can also lead to the creation of ‘echo chambers’, as studies show that in-group community building is powerful on social media. The choice of which account to follow or adhering to one narrative while resisting another creates a closed system that can prevent the free movement of competing voices (Matuszewski and Szabó 2019), possibly nurturing higher levels of extremism (Hong and Kim 2016).

The above research is a useful foundation from which to expand our own study on hashtag activism and construction of social identities. Furthermore, our research validates our theoretical framework of the Discourse of Illusion as relevant in demonstrating how various discourse clans in society are constantly attempting to persuade audiences of their version of the truth; and through various linguistic and semiotic resources aim to gain acceptance of their representation of reality as the dominant framework for the understanding of any issue or event (Bhatia 1 2015). This paper thus seeks to expand the conversation on the impact of social media, in particular Twitter, on political activism, and specifically the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

2.3 The Discourse of Illusion

The subjective construction of our realities within our minds inevitably draws on our past experiences and ideologies (cf. Bhatia 2015); thus, our reconstructions become a product of history. This phenomenon Bourdieu (1990) refers to as *habitus*, which reflects predisposed forms of behaviour. Though not consciously controlled, these are still regulative as they naturalize into our consciousness. Furthermore, these ideological reconstructions of reality materialise in our language and actions. However, the realization of public/group consent, in line with the “principle of social validation” to ascertain “what other people think is correct” (Cialdini 1997, 199), can help such reconstructions achieve a sense of objectivity and truthfulness. To this end, authority or expertise, power struggles, and hegemony, as well as material means (e.g. language, modality etc.) play a considerable part in the collective acceptance of particular ideological reconstructions of reality.

More specifically, this paper is concerned with collective illusions (cf. Carfantan 2003) surfacing as a result of competing narratives regarding sociocultural and political issues. Typically, powerful discourse clans, with access to mass or social media, can employ particular semantico-pragmatic and lexico-syntactic resources to persuade audiences of the legitimacy of their versions of reality. Thus, collective illusions arise when particular versions of reality (be it of an event, issue, phenomena, etc.) become recognised as the *dominant framework* (through endorsement from many witnesses) within which understanding of *that* reality operates (Bhatia

2015). Such illusions become challenging to disprove because they start representing what is true (for any particular social group) with regards to any aspect of reality.

Subjective conceptualizations of reality offered as narratives of truth become all the more persuasive because they can evoke social fear, prejudice, or doubt and which audiences are free to accept or reject, in turn making the proposition all the more persuasive in nature (Perloff 1993, 12). This process can also be understood in terms of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, whereby a "hegemonic class, or part of a class, is one which gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle" (in translation, Simon 1999, 25–6). In drawing this comparison, we can elevate the earlier notion of *dominant framework* to

dominant representations [or conceptualizations] of specific instances of reality, proliferated through various multimodalities, [which] go on to constitute the hegemonic discursive framework through which understanding, action and discussion is formed. What is of concern here is not necessarily the falsity or subjectivity of the representations [or conceptualizations] conveyed but rather the process through which they acquire a status of facticity/objectivity.

(Bhatia 2015, 14)

Establishment of consent on the part of audiences regarding a particular version of reality can generate collective illusions. This results in homogeneity in terms of in-group beliefs and practices, which further generate categories and stereotypes "through which we routinely, albeit largely unconsciously, observe and classify events and experiences" (Sarangi and Candlin 2003, 117; cf. Tomasello and Moll 2010). In this way, within the Discourse of Illusion framework, the discourse itself becomes the modality, the means to transform audiences' perceptions of the world, and the evolving narrative meanings of complex constructs.

As such, the Discourse of Illusion proves an appropriate framework to adopt in the investigation in the analysis of Hong Kong protests because it is concerned with efforts on the part of writers or speakers to gain collective consent for their subjective reconstructions of events or reality in order to objectify them. This invariably draws discursive illusions away from basic text to larger areas of context and social reality. The analytical framework employed will explore discursive illusions through three interrelated components – historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, and social impact (discussed in more detail in the following section) to allow richer multi-perspective analysis of dynamic discursive processes at both textual and contextual levels.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Analytical framework

To closely explore how discursive illusions are realised, we will draw on a combined analysis incorporating dimensions of historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, linked to an account of some of the social effects of these actions. An overview of each is provided below.

1. **Historicity:** An individual or group's habitus situates current activities in history in order to provide meanings they would not have otherwise had (Leudar and Nekvapil 2011). To gauge the emergence of history in current narrative and action we focus on "the unconscious or conscious reconceptualization of historical antecedents in an attempt to situate and present specific instances of current reality, often in relation to the future" (Bhatia 2015, 52). Analysis at this level utilizes temporal references, invocation of past events or sociocultural/political history, and recontextualisation of present occurrences in terms of these past events.
2. **Linguistic and semiotic action:** This involves discursively constructing subjective versions of reality, typically through metaphor. To analyse this, we borrow elements of critical discourse analysis to focus on underlying ideologies and intentions. The emphasis here is on the speaker or writer's intention in the creation and diffusion of metaphor by blending both cognitive and pragmatic perspectives and deploying metaphor as a persuasive tool. Analysis at this level involves looking at various metaphors/metaphorical representations which can connect previous discourse events and the current context.
3. **Social impact:** Language and actions of an individual or group often result in various sociocultural and political stereotypes, usefully analysed through Jayyusi's (1984, 183) concept of identity-based categorisation. Analysis at this level involves assigning individuals or groups to a certain category, often establishing the ideological construction of an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in the context of complex issues.

3.2 Data collection and procedure

The data for the study are comprised of two main components. The first of these is tweets posted using protest-related hashtags. The second component of the data is the set of governmental speeches and press releases communicated by CE Carrie Lam.

Coding and Analysis of Twitter Data

The social media data for the study consist of tweets from three hashtags frequently utilised in relation to the anti-extradition bill protests. These were collected from the period June 9 – September 4 with the assistance of hashtag analytical site www.trackmyhashtag.com. The time period marks the major developments of the one and two million-man marches, Yuen Long

and Prince Edward clashes, the announcement of the bill’s second reading, its consequential shelving and ultimate withdrawal. The tweets collected were limited to unique tweets (i.e. no retweets) and to the geographic location of the Hong Kong region. These criteria were driven by our primary interest in what individual Hong Kongers were saying *themselves* on Twitter in response to the proposed bill and the protests, as opposed to the *sharing* of views and thoughts as is the case with retweets. Second, the geographic origin of the tweets was restricted to Hong Kong due to our interest in searching for correlations and contradictions between the narrative of local Hong Kongers and the governmental counter-narrative. Details of the collected tweets can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1: Details of the complete dataset

Hashtag	Number of Tweets
#antiELAB	41,287
#HongKongProtests	35,668
#NoChinaExtradition	2,646
TOTAL	79,601

The tweets were compiled into one large corpus. From this juncture, we utilised the corpus analysis software AntConc (Anthony 2016) to determine the most frequently occurring words and word clusters, which were shown in a wordlist. As the wordlist is inclusive of function words such as articles and prepositions that do not carry meaning, we manually removed these and focused on content words. However, we point out that pronouns are typically considered function words, but as they can also reflect more than just pronomial reference and such notions as solidarity and othering, we retained these. The final word list (top 30) can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2: Wordlist produced by AntConc (top 30)

Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	police	16	protest
2	Hong Kong	17	our
3	protesters	18	tear gas
4	we	19	today
5	you	20	government
6	they	21	stand
7	china	22	democracy
8	people	23	support
9	what	24	freedom
10	now	25	them
11	Hong Kongers	26	protests
12	their	27	Carrie
13	station	28	march
14	please	29	citizens
15	will	30	arrested

We then focused on specific clusters of either two or three words, including both the words before and after the keyword. We used the concordance tool within AntConc to view the cluster within the broader contexts of the tweets within which they appeared, shown in a keyword in context (KWIC) display, which was helpful for the qualitative analysis. An example of the KWIC display for the cluster ‘police brutality’ can be seen in Figure 3.

1 , 中共做到了, 但, 香港能嗎? #antiELAB #ExtraditionBill #HongKongProtest" "We shall not get accustomed to
2 evening. <https://t.co/MovRkshSdG> "Meanwhile, outside police HQ, now. Protest against
3 ! Send them to China! 🙄🙄🙄 #antiELAB #HKPoliceState <https://t.co/9zYRYNTgN> " time! Send them to China!
4 and supporters speaking outside Hong Kong police headquarters to voice concerns about
5 journalist groups to hold a silent parade on Sunday 10.30am to protest
6 [://t.co/0EgCnKQPLU](https://t.co/0EgCnKQPLU) Manager of Police Headquarters' canteen became fed up with
7 on! #FreedomHK #GlobeConnect #antiELAB #StandwithHK <https://t.co/JwLUX104nQ> "Hong Kong
8 a fair, open and the right role to investigate for all the
9 of life, from public housing estates to expats, support it especially after
10 #antiELAB DISBAND & REFORM HKPF! #HongKong <https://t.co/aRbf7u00pt> " **police brutality** - A perfect storm of "we won't sell off the police".
police brutality, after a young woman was shot in the eye yesterday #antielab #
police brutality again! #HKPoliceTerrorism #hkpolicebrutality #HKPoliceState #antiELAB <https://t.co/Onb8C0b9>
police brutality against journalists/press freedom in Hong Kong #antiELAB <https://t.co/>
police brutality against journalists. They've called on participants to wear black and
police brutality against protesters and resigned immediately #antiELAB #HongKong #ExtraditionBill #反送中" TVB
police brutality against protesters #FreedomHK #GlobeConnect #antiELAB #StandwithHK #HongKongProtests
police brutality amid the #antiELAB movement <https://t.co/F8XXO8le72> " @Aureliano_
police brutality & MTR shutdowns. #antiELAB #HongKongProtests" "That's the truth! And that'
police brutality and abuse of power #hongkongprotest #antiELAB <https://t.co/ytCJdxmkOU> #

Figure 3: KWIC display of the cluster ‘police brutality’

Through analysis of the tweets using words from the wordlist, we identified three key themes of:

1. Representation of Hong Kong identity
2. Representation of CE Carrie Lam and government actions
3. Representation of police actions

Within these, we explored keywords and associated clusters of relevance to produce three sets of 100 tweets (one for each theme). These were analysed qualitatively by the research team for common themes, categorisations, metaphors and other semantic or linguistic features.

Analysis of CE Carrie Lam Speeches

During the chosen time period, the Chief Executive made 12 key addresses. The translated and original English transcripts for the speeches were downloaded from the official government website (<https://www.ceo.gov.hk/eng/speech.html>). The speeches that were translated were compared to their original language video recordings to determine any discrepancies and confirm accuracy of translation. The speeches were then manually analysed in a qualitative manner by the research team, which included identifying common themes, metaphors, significant categorisations, in addition to various other semantico-pragmatic and lexico-syntactic resources.

To summarise, the overall approach to the analysis of the data can be broken down into two key parts – 1) the corpus analysis of the tweets and subsequent qualitative coding, and 2) the qualitative coding of CE Carrie Lam’s media releases in relation to the unfolding protests. Both sets of data were compared in terms of any overlapping, significant themes by the research team, and further in terms of how these themes were realized through distinct metaphors and engendering different categorisations of the key socio-political groups involved.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

We organise the analysis, drawing on the framework's three-pronged approach, in the following sections – 1) Hong Kong identity, its values and core ideas, and what it means to be a true Hong Konger; 2) the representation of government actions; and 3) the actions and intentions of the police. All three sections explore the use of discourse in the conceptualisation of Hong Kong protests beyond the representation of more micro-components, including specific groups and key moments of action, to the representation of the macro-event, and how the metaphorical representation of such events shapes how people view not only the events themselves, but also the participants of those events.

4.1 Representation of Hong Kong

Ideology can be understood as the power struggles that take place within a community, the dynamic threads of thoughts and beliefs that maintain or resist various power relations. This stands especially true when trying to comprehend the creation of subjective realities, and ultimately, discursive illusions. This is evident in how both protesters and the government attempt to reconceptualise Hong Kong's identity and core values. To begin, the protester tweets below contribute to a narrative that conceptualises the protests as a battle, casting protesters in the role of Hong Kong's battle-worn soldiers.

Tweets:

- 1: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. #SOSHK #FreeHK #antiELAB #FreedomHongKong #HKprotests #HongKong
- 2: #FreedomHK #AntiELAB This city is beautiful because of every soul that fight for freedom. we long for freedom and we will never back down
- 3: "The most beautiful and the sadness scenery of Hong Kong. We fight for democracy and freedom. We ask for no China extradition. There was 2000001 Hongkongers walk together on Sunday. You are not the only one. #antiELAB #NoExtraditionToChina #HongKongProtest
- 4: "We shall not flag or fail, we shall go on to the end, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER.

Here, Hong Kong is represented in terms of land and territory that needs to be protected. Nature metaphors are used to characterise protesting Hongkongers as true to the soil of Hong Kong (*beautiful and the sadness scenery, growing confidence and strength in the air*). The city, conceptualised as land, hills, water, and fields, is personified as the soul of Hongkongers, reflecting their determination and vulnerability, as well as their interconnectedness. Repetition of the phrases *we shall fight* and *we shall never surrender* recontextualise part of Winston Churchill's speech delivered to the House of Commons in 1940 creating two discursive effects:

firstly, the unifying pronoun emphasises collectivity through the topos of similarity (Wodak et al. 1999), serving to legitimise the cause; secondly, appropriation of key parts of the speech likens the events of Hong Kong to that of the German invasion of WWII. This fortifies a narrative about current resistance, echoing Bakhtin's (1981, 293) position that "each word tastes of a context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life", allowing contributors of any narrative to negotiate and manipulate historical events in order to reinterpret the present. Furthermore, use of words and phrases situated in a semantic category implying defence (*defend, fight, never surrender, never back down, fight for freedom*) have the effect of categorising protesters as participants in an illusory attack vs. defence parallelism, generating sympathy. Weekend marches are recontextualised into a battle for Hong Kong's soul, while nature imagery can be equated with political freedom. Through this conceptualisation of reality, protesters are able to positively represent themselves as soldiers and warriors, who valiantly defend their city, ascribed actions typical of their category (*shall fight, never surrender, not flag or fail, growing strength and confidence, defend*), actions that connote determination, courage, unity, and altruism.

These rallying cries have also given rise to a new understanding of Hong Kong and Hongkonger identity. While there has always existed a degree of prejudice in society against those not considered ethnically local, even from a time before the 1997 Handover, in more recent years it has devolved to a difference between Native Hongkongers and Chinese immigrants born and raised on the Mainland. This has further exacerbated the hostile divisions that have surfaced through the most recent anti-extradition bill protests, so that post-protest usage of the term Hongkongers "does not so much designate a people defined by blood or history, but acts as a symbol of resistance and political participation" (Laikwan 2020, 214). Increasingly characterised by either their support for or resistance to the protests, Hong Kong has been coded into yellow (pro-protest) and blue (anti-protest) camps. These divisions enforced through echo chambers where, our data shows, there are fewer original tweets than retweets, with existing messages amplified by those adhering to particular ideological groups. These divisions seem somewhat ironic considering that Hongkongers have never before been more united in their quest for sociocultural change, and if "there is any silver lining from the turmoil, it would be that anger at the government has transcended skin colour and cultures, uniting otherwise disparate groups in the city" (Chan and Yeo 2019). A common cause has helped expatriates and minorities in their efforts at integration into a society that seems to increasingly narrow down differences to a reductionist Us (protesters) vs. Them (anti-protesters) dichotomy. Thus, a common criticism of the HK movement by Mainland and diasporic communities is that it stemmed from prejudice against Mainland Chinese and resistance to assimilation (Laikwan 2020). As a result, the ideological complexities that govern Hong Kong's unique status as a Special Administrative Region are reduced to over-simplified dichotomies between those for and those against the movement.

Even the collection of hashtags contextualising many tweets project Hong Kong as a city in the clutches of an invading entity; making rallying calls to external saviours in the form of Western governments. For instance, use of Twitter to proliferate hashtag combinations such as #SOSHK, #FreeHK and #HKProtests in Tweet 1 illustrate elevation of the movement to a

“global, epochal event... [aided by] the role of Western or global and Hong Kong media (i.e. non-mainland media) as a fundamental driver of the events themselves... [t]his has been a media-driven, tele-genic movement from the very beginning” (Vukovich 2020, 202). Use of social media platforms has enabled protesters to create a dialogue with the outside world, and as such transmit and control to some extent the narrative shaping outside perceptions.

However, while we see the protester narrative personifying Hong Kong as an identity that resists forces it specifically deems to be alien, and begs for solidarity with a social movement that distinguishes groups of people, whether ethnic, generational or any others, based on political affiliation, the HKSAR government projects a more contrasting representation of reality. Consider the following extracts from the CE’s speeches below where we see the emergence of *double contrastive identities* (Leudar et al. 2004), an inevitable consequence of discursive illusions, whereby groups and individuals can play multiple roles or be depicted either positively or negatively based on different narratives and perceptions.

Chief Executive Speech extracts:

- 5: Hong Kong is a free, open and pluralistic society that values different opinions on everything. However, there is a bottom line in regard to the means of expressing an opinion, be it a supporting or opposing view. If a goal can be reached by radical and violent means, such scenes will become more severe, which will definitely put Hong Kong in harm's way. (June 12 2019)
- 6: I would like to thank all the pro-establishment legislators and members of the public for their support all along for our legislative exercise, as well as the people and organisations that have expressed their views in a peaceful and rational manner, even if they do not support the bill. As a free, open and pluralistic society, Hong Kong needs such a spirit of mutual respect and harmony in diversity. (June 15 2019)
- 7: The enactment of this bill will help to raise Hong Kong's international profile and also demonstrate that we are a place with excellent rule of law, not only for our own citizens but also in contribution to the combatting of serious crime on a cross-border and transnational basis. (June 15 2019)
- 8: We are still very proud of Hong Kong possessing these core values and being an international financial and business centre that is attractive to overseas investors, so it is for all of us to join hands, to rally together, to say no to the chaos and the violence that we are seeing. Hong Kong values freedoms that include freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of media reporting. If individual sectors and members of that sector want to express a view to the Government, we respect that expression and we will listen. (05 August 2019)

In the narrative put forward by the HKSAR Government, Hong Kong’s strength and identity are curated as one which favours harmony and unity. Repetition of words and phrases that emphasize diversity (*pluralistic, open, valued different opinions, mutual respect, freedom of*

expression) serve the purpose of negatively representing those who stand in contradiction to these *core values*, namely, protesters who proliferate divisive discourse segmenting society into blue and yellow camps. The conceptualisation of a true Hongkonger, or what Hong Kong is all about, stands in stark comparison to that proposed by the protesters. In fact, the official narrative seeks to more specifically distinguish between *'the people and organisations that have expressed their views in a peaceful and rational manner'* and those using more *'radical and violent means'*.

The use of legal discourse (*radical and violent means, put Hong Kong in harm's way, our legislative exercise, excellent rule of law, combatting of serious crime, to say no to the chaos and the violence*) enforces the asymmetrical category-pair of lawful versus lawless, with the lawful side having the power (and obligation) to pronounce moral judgement on the lawless side, which in turn is denied any grounds for explanation. In this case, any form of legitimacy is removed from actions of protesters, particularly the more hardcore radicals. By representing violent protesters as lawless, the narrative legitimizes the present and future actions of the Government, since they are in line with the law. As Culpeper and Tantucci 2021, 150) argue, “[m]oral obligations provide a means of address, of sanctioning those who are not cooperative, such as ‘free riders’”, who benefit from socially established moral cooperation, without reciprocating. Attribution of actions which depict violence (*violent, severe, harm, chaos, serious crime*) in contrast to those that denote peace (*free, open, peaceful, rational, mutual respect, harmony, join hands, rally together, respect the expression*) can be argued to magnify the criminality of the actions, giving them a sense of intensity and degree of unlawfulness. By judging radical protester actions as criminal, the Government places itself firmly at the other end of the lawless vs lawful “standardised relational pair” (Leudar et al. 2004, 245), defined “in terms of typical expectations that incumbents of one category have of incumbents of the other” (ibid). In this way, criminalisation (Lazar and Lazar 2004), is often a key strategy in out-casting and delegitimising the polarised Other. In this reconceptualisation of reality, it is not the Government or police that are violating the Hong Kong’s Basic Law and thus a core Hong Kong value, but rather the radical protesters who are on the other side of law and order.

In addition, while protesters put forward their narrative through global platforms such as Twitter, in order to appeal to the international community, the official narrative does the same by emphasizing Hong Kong’s image on the global stage. Through reiteration of words and phrases that depict Hong Kong as an international city (*raise Hong Kong's international profile, we are a place with excellent rule of law, international financial and business centre*) the narrative seeks to justify that the law makes Hong Kong more international and not less. Constant use of words like *free, freedom, freedoms* portray Hong Kong as free as opposed to enslaved; lawful as opposed to suppressive; and international as opposed to isolationist.

What we see, thus, in the contest to define Hong Kong’s identity, is an effort by the protester narrative to amplify the movement as a battle for Hong Kong’s freedom, with those participating in the movement as valiant soldiers, courageous in their pursuit, and by doing so, the narrative heightens the urgency of the socio-political situation. By contrast, the

Governmental narrative plays down the million-people strong marches as merely an *expression of views and opinions*, playing down the anger of the protest movement, to simply civic dialogue/consultation. This serves further to segregate and delegitimise the more radical protesters from the rest of society.

4.2 Representation of Government Actions

The representation of government actions, or *perceived inaction* is of great significance within the dataset as it is these actions, or *perceived inaction*, that instigated parts of the unrest in Hong Kong. It is also here that we see perhaps the most obvious collision between the public narrative (on Twitter) and the position of the Government (in CE Carrie Lam's speeches). The tweets below highlight the narrative among the protesters.

Tweets:

- 9: #HongKong Carrie Lam offers no solutions and shows no sympathy after night of violence, which mobs attacks and beat civilians, it's the real riot!
#FreeHongKong #HongKongProtests #antiELAB
- 10: Carrie Lam condemned violence against police, calling protesters mobs. She called herself "mother" n now she behaves like mum of the last century: ignore kids' pleas, beat them up if they don't behave. And we all know how that will turn out #antiELAB #HongKongProtests #shatin
- 11: #CarrieLam trys to dissolve us by pretending soft as her usual tactics, we will not be fooled by her again and again. Cheater is always a cheater.
#5DemandsNotOneLess #antiELAB #FreeHongKong
- 12: She LIED to the whole World and PRETEND she already one step backward... NO! She just LEAN back and Hongkonger have completely lost trust with her. We need HK Act to protect our future interest! #AntiELAB
#TheDevilIsInTheDetails #StandwithHK #PassTheAct

The overwhelming sentiment here is a lack of trust as a direct result of perceived dishonesty on behalf of the CE (*do not be fooled, she LIED, lost trust, and cheater is always a cheater*). However, a more nuanced reading suggests that her dishonesty is subversive, through an implication in the tweets that she is hard-hearted (*pretending to be soft, no solutions, no sympathy, ignore kids, beat them up, dissolve us*).

Relatedly, the familial notion of motherhood and a mother's relationship with her children is also raised in Tweet 10, and indirectly referenced through the notion of being 'soft' in Tweet 11, which is significant on multiple levels. Firstly, the metaphorical and symbolic honorific of the 'mother/father of a nation' is one that is rarely, if ever, self-conferred, but is the result of a long life of service or of having played a significant role in improving the lives of the citizenry or even of establishing the socio-political system (famous examples would include George

Washington [USA], Nelson Mandela [South Africa], or Mahatma Gandhi [India]). However, Tam (2019) reports on the CE producing this exact analogy, with Hongkongers referred to as her children and she the mother. Invoking this in relation to oneself can be seen as an act of condescension, and young Hongkongers may have rejected it for this reason. As part of this rejection, the tweeter does so with vitriol, suggesting that not only does this analogy not fit her, but that she exhibits orthodox attitudes, particularly in relation to younger people, that are out of place in the contemporary socio-political domain. With this being said, it must be noted there was perceived support from different parts of society, concerned with the changing tactics of hardcore protesters, shifting from peaceful marches to use of petrol bombs, destruction of infrastructure, and eventually in November 2019 a siege of two universities, demonstrating the emergence of discursive illusions from contestations between various discourse clans, each supporting their own conceptualisation of reality.

Finally, there is shown to be contention around the label of the ‘mob’. The CE uses the term to refer to alleged violent protesters, which is shown to be in stark contrast to her own self-positioning as a caring ‘mother’ figure. On the other hand, the tweeter uses it to refer to the police as a means of strengthening the narrative around government and police as oppressors and citizens as the victims.

In contrast to the narrative depicted by the broader public in the tweets above, the extracts from CE Carrie Lam’s speeches communicate a vastly different narrative, as highlighted below.

Chief Executive Speech extracts:

- 13: ...our intention to do this legislative amendment after months of research and international study, the intensity of discussion in these four months is quite unprecedented for a bill proposed by the Government... very little merit to be gained to delay the bill – it will just cause more anxiety and divisiveness in society. (June 10 2019)
- 14: As a responsible government, we have to maintain law and order on the one hand, and evaluate the situation for the greatest interest of Hong Kong, including restoring calmness in society as soon as possible and avoiding any more injuries to law enforcement officers and citizens... the original purposes of the exercise stem from my and my team’s passion for Hong Kong and our empathy for Hong Kong people. (June 15 2019)
- 15: The Chief Executive clearly heard the views expressed in a peaceful and rational manner. She acknowledged that this as a civilised, free, open and pluralistic society that values mutual respect, harmony and diversity. The Government also respects and treasures these core values of Hong Kong. (June 16 2020)
- 16: I have been listening very carefully and attentively to the views expressed over this period... we will suspend the legislative exercise, and immediately that afternoon we put a stop to the legislative exercise by informing the Legislative

Council that the bill will no longer proceed to second reading debate. I'm standing here to make a further commitment in recognition of the anxieties and the fears that have been caused by this bill in the last few months. I said, and I undertook, that if we do not have that level of confidence to address those anxieties and fears and differences in opinion, we will not proceed with the legislative exercise again. (June 18 2019)

Emerging from these extracts is a tone of care, calm, taking responsibility, and of being meticulous in the response taken. The CE's responses suggest that what is guiding her actions is founded on her connection with the people of Hong Kong; thus, she aligns herself with them and frames any decision she makes as one that serves everyone. She refers to her *passion for Hong Kong, empathy* for the people, and *addressing anxieties and fears*, and in doing so attempts to construct a sense of solidarity with the people through the strategy of unification, expressed in the topos of comparison (Wodak et al. 1999). Wallaschek (2020, 79) calls this a form of cultural solidarity, which revolves around the CE "arguing for a shared identity and norms". In line with this, the CE also promotes her own rational and considered approach, led by *months of research and international study*. The protesters themselves are not mentioned explicitly, but it can be inferred that in highlighting her own rationality and rigour she is positioning herself in terms of a contrastive identity, in opposition to that characterised by the irrational, emotion-driven and radical protesters. Language that derives from more corporate discourse (*months of research, little merit to be gained, evaluate the situation, original purposes of the exercise, my and my team's, we will not proceed*) also stands in sharp contrast not only with the maternal analogy used by the CE herself, but also the more emotional language emphasising turmoil and urgency employed by protesters. Although, one could argue as well that in part the difference in tone and urgency reflects the culture of the medium used to proliferate each narrative, whereby press conferences are serious, ritualistic communicative events and social media encourages colloquial spontaneity.

Among the most salient aspect of the CE excerpts here is the deflection of blame in relation to physical injury. She states the need to avoid *any more injuries to law enforcement officers and citizens*; it can be argued here that in foregrounding law enforcement officers in the clause the listener is expected to first interpret the offender as being the protesters themselves. Then, avoiding injuries to citizens is mentioned but not in a way that implies their injuries come from law enforcement – it is left somewhat open to interpretation. This acts to discursively establish a conceptualisation of reality from the Government's perspective that reinforces their position. This representation and positioning of the actions of the actors involved work to mitigate any negative characterisation of the government's action, which Hansson (2018) suggests are common discursive strategies used in order to deflect accusations.

4.3 Representation of Police

The issue that attracted the most attention in the tweets and also within traditional mainstream media concerned the actions of police, with a focus on violent behaviour. This was also prominent due to the typically perceived behaviour of Hongkongers as peaceful, as evidenced

from previous movements in Hong Kong. The contested nature of representation seems to be what has caused the greatest clash of perspective, with protesters depicting their actions as peaceful but being forcibly interrupted, while the governmental narrative suggests the protesters themselves were engaged in violent and threatening behaviour. The narrative among the protesters is evidenced in the tweets that follow.

Tweets:

- 17: 3 people went blind cause of the Hong Kong police brutality - aiming at #hkprotesters head and eyes to shoot. Still no any apologies and the polices are getting more violence days to days! We are asking for #FiveDemandsNoOneLess ! They must take the responsibility! #antiELAB
- 18: what happened in HK on 831 police shot the press in the eye...again they rejected our protest application...again mtr stopped the train service under police order...again #HongKongProtests #antiELAB #SaveHongKong #FreedomHK
- 19: Hong Kong police violence is indiscriminate. An elderly knelt on the ground and begged Hong Kong police to stop shooting. But riot police just kicked forcefully right on his crotch. All show that Hong Kong is turning into a police state. #antiELAB #HongKongProtests
- 20: Riot Police attack passengers in the train randomly and violently. Now they are still saying that ppl are participating in an unlawful meeting. Police also assault protesters as RUBBISH and COCKROACHES. #PoliceBrutality #StandwithHK #antiELAB

The first thing to emerge from these tweets is the explicit mention of violent behaviour on part of the police (*blind cause, brutality, to shoot, getting more violent, shot the press, stopped the train, indiscriminate, kicked forcefully, attack, assault*), categorising them as aggressive. The emphasis on protesters and members of the press being blinded by the violence can also be said to carry some metaphorical and ideological weight. For instance, the blinding of the protesters results in a loss of perspective and allows the police to continue their actions without scrutiny. A similar reference in Tweet 18 can also be interpreted as the need of the police to be able to carry out these actions without witness. Repetitive use of the adverb *again* in conjunction with expressions denoting lack of remorse (*still no apologies, just kicked, randomly*) and intensification of action (*getting more, day to day, turning into*) negatively represent police actions as gradually becoming amplified – grammatical choices such as *also, all, and again* communicating the protesters’ perception of continuing victimisation throughout the protests. In addition, mention of stopping the train service in Tweet 18 can be interpreted as a complaint not against an action of public protection, but the hampering of movement through denial of basic public infrastructure, again depicting the constraints placed in protesters by the police.

A final point from these tweets relates to the categorisation processes that are taking place to aid in the communication of the message. The police are referred to interchangeably as *police*,

Hong Kong police and *riot police*. In effect, this may be done to support the protester argument of Hong Kong morphing into a *police state*. Rather than normal police carrying out their duties, they have been established as *riot police* in the protester narrative, a label and categorisation that carries with it negative connotations and insinuates the use of oppressive force. This is heightened through a secondary categorisation in Tweet 20 where the protesters are described as *RUBBISH* and *COCKROACHES*, both things that would typically be disposed of or killed. This increases the distance between the protesters and police both ideologically but also in terms of their identity as Hongkongers. Thus, within the protester narrative we find that the police are categorised as aggressive and violent, whereas, protesters, characterised as *people*, *HK protesters*, *press*, *elderly*, *passengers* are the incumbents of the opposite end of that category-pair, namely, as victims.

In contrast to the protester narrative, we see the Government narrative displays more support for the Hong Kong police, as they are in effect the mechanism through which the government enforces civic obedience naturally. This is done primarily through establishing a visceral sense of fear of a threatening situation that needs to be managed, as can be seen in the following extracts.

Chief Executive Speech extracts:

- 21: Anybody who has committed an offence has to be brought to justice... if some participants, some protesters, have resorted to violence and there is sufficient evidence to prove that they have used violence, then of course the Police needs to take action. The action includes investigation, collecting evidence and then consulting the Department of Justice on the prosecution. (June 18 2019)
- 22: We had officers inside the LegCo defending LegCo for nearly eight hours. During the period, we had been under siege of the protestors. They kept on using violent tactics to try to intrude into the LegCo... And in fear of a total dark out that some protestors turned off the lights, I'm afraid there will be people stepping people, or there will be wrong move on either side, both the Police and the protestors. (July 2 2019)
- 23: ...The police force is safeguarding Hong Kong's law and order, and ensuring Hong Kong's continued safety. This is what they have achieved over many years of hard work, to become Asia's finest. That is true and I am very sad every time I meet with the Commissioner that the force is under extreme pressure in enforcing the law during very difficult situations.... (August 5 2019)
- 24: ...police operations could not be determined by someone like myself who is outside the police, especially when policemen have to make on-the-spot judgment of what will be in the best interest and the safety of people around during that particular situation. The police have their code of practice to follow.... (August 13 2019)

Alongside the evocation of fear and the sense of civil unrest that requires police intervention, we can see in these extracts use of legal discourse in description of legal due process and procedure (*justice, taking action, investigation, sufficient evidence, evidence collection, consultation, prosecution*), which often permits the CE to remove herself from the crosshairs of blame. The effect of this is to situate the response of both the Government and police as one of rationality and due consideration. By default, this categorises the protesters as being irrational and behaving impulsively and not in the best interest of Hong Kong. This is emphasised through further linguistic choices that evoke a sense of fear, and of Hong Kong's unity and the police being *under siege* and *extreme pressure* from the protesters. In any given context, the role of the police is to reduce pressure and end sieges, so Lam positions them as merely doing their jobs. Within this narrative, the actions of hardcore protesters are represented as violent and criminal (*committed an offence, resorted to violence, used violence, siege of the protesters, violent tactics, wrong move, stepping on people, intrude*), contrasting more positive actions of the police (*brought to justice, take action, investigate, defend, enforcing law, best interest of the people*), converting the previously mention aggressor-victim category-pairing into an aggressor-defender one. Thus, it can be said that perhaps the most telling contrast between the protester narrative is, on the one hand, the distinction between police actions being framed as police brutality, while on the other, their actions are typical, required, rational and lawful.

5. CONCLUSION

We analysed the social media narrative on Twitter that emerged surrounding the anti-extradition bill protests that took place in Hong Kong during 2019. The Twitter posts sourced through the hashtags #antiELAB, #NoChinaExtradition and #HongKongProtests represent the social unrest the proposed bill amendments caused, demonstrating the collective identity of protesters and expressed this in a form of connective action through the affordances of social media. The narrative was largely representative of protesters' (comprised primarily of Hong Kong's youth) conceptualisation of reality, leading to discursive illusions due to the participation and acceptance in the belief among those protesting on social media that the version of events they represented is the *only* version. Through use of Bhatia's (2015) Discourse of Illusion framework, which analyses texts through historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, and social impact through categorisation, we sought to demonstrate the contestation in narratives offered by opposing discourse clans.

The narrative around these protests continues to grow, and is certainly not limited to the Twitter platform, but our analysis highlights that social media has emerged as a primary means for protesters to proliferate their conceptualisation of the event and issues plaguing Hong Kong's socio-political landscape. Our data reveals the emergence of three dominant themes within the two overarching narratives – one proliferated by protesters and the other by the HKSAR Government. The first theme, connected to Hong Kong's identity and core values, is represented by protesters as a battle for Hong Kong's soul, the protesters narrative intensifying the urgency of the movement by drawing sharp lines between blue and yellow camps in society

divided by political affiliation, between courageous protesters depicted as frontline resistance. By contrast, the Governmental narrative plays down the movement by depicting it as discontent and civic debate, reframing Hong Kong as a pluralistic society, of which a key characteristic is diversity in views. The second theme is the representation of Government actions, characterized as hard-hearted in the protester narrative, which refutes the maternal role that the CE casts herself in. This contrasted with the Governmental narrative which utilised a more studious and sombre tone, employing language more at home within corporate discourse, and seeking to present a rational contrast to irrational protesters. The third theme, which represents actions of the police, perhaps serves the starkest difference in the two narratives. On the one hand, the protester narrative engages the victim-aggressor category pairing to portray the police as violent; on the other hand, the Governmental narrative draws on legal metaphors to establish a visceral sense of a threatening situation that needs to be resolved through obeying the laws of Hong Kong by a brave and dedicated police force.

Further research in the area of digital activism and the consequently arising discursive illusions is an especially crucial domain of investigation since we have an opportunity to closely explore how social media platforms are chipping away at political apathy and societal disengagement. This is especially true with regards to the youth, and not just in Hong Kong, but around the world, whereby regardless of their ideological and political underpinnings, young people are engaging in socio-political dialogue, contributing to the multidimensionality of worldviews, more traditionally dictated by conventional powerhouses and figures. Digital activism has also, thus, changed the linguistic and semiotic nature of socio-political dialogue and narrative, making it all the more contentious, dynamic and unstable. This evolution in language and medium itself demands further study of what we today believe to be social and political truths.

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