

The Clash of Pro and Anti-Protest Sentiments during the Pandemic: Youths' Narratives in Malaysia and Hong Kong as Contrasting Political Communication

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects, impacting not only the health and economic sectors but also the global political landscape. In response, certain youth groups have turned to protests as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction with their governments. This study aims to analyse the conflicting narratives between protest groups that support the right to assemble and the anti-protest narratives promoted by governments. While the Malaysian and Hong Kong governments implemented Movement Control Order and a national lockdown respectively, to curb the spread of the coronavirus, young people within these countries perceived these measures as incompatible with their political objectives. This study employs a narrative analysis approach and the theoretical framework of New Social Movement (NSM) in order to examine this issue. The findings of this study indicate the youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong who supported mobilizing protests during the pandemic perceive the government's presented narratives and response as a defence mechanism to opportunistic suppression of democratic, government-critical actions. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a clear clash of implicit political messages conveyed by both the youths and governments, with the pandemic serving as the instigating factor in motivation for or against the mobilization of protests.

Keywords: *Protest, political-communication, youth, Malaysia, Hong Kong.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between health issues, political communication, youth democracy expressed through protest, and the governments' decisions to implement movement control mechanisms are a well-established phenomenon. However, the reality of the current situation is that the COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon that challenges the prevailing understanding of pandemics as global health issues exclusively. Accordingly, the current protests manifest as political crises for governments that transcend beyond the health sector (Bol et al., 2020). In this situation, young people have played a significant role in connecting the pandemic to a new form of political communication that reflects the multifaceted nature of protests, youth identity, political communication on social media, and movement control narratives. This change in narrative augments the pandemic to no longer be viewed as solely a battle against infectious diseases, but rather, as a tool employed by many governments to suppress democracy and human rights. To this end, Purnell (2021) and Jamieson and Kenski (2017) argue that COVID-19 represents a political crisis that has exposed the limitations of traditional disciplinary boundaries within media studies, political science, international relations, and psychology in interpreting political communication.

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Likewise, Bratton (2022) explained that the clash between protesters and anti-protesters observed during the pandemic period on a global scale informed new perspectives on the nature of political communication, especially in the context of developing countries' degree of democratization. Given this context, Gerbaudo (2021) emphasizes the importance of analysing the interactions between citizens, government, and protesters during a pandemic as a means of evaluating the failure of democratic systems to safeguard the rights of citizens. The aim of such an analysis is to enable citizens to evaluate implicit political motives when the state becomes a battleground for opposing political ideologies, and to assert their rights in this context. Liu and Shan (2021), in their study of the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and political communication in China, concluded that the government's failure to communicate with their public was sufficient in causing a public panic and a communication crisis that triggered the emergence of more liberally aligned political views on Weibo, a Chinese version of X (formerly known as twitter), which began to be filled with online social movements such as #wewantfreedomofspeech. Likewise, in Malaysia, with the new media revolution, Malaysians are more exposed to the notions of political liberalisation in the context of freedom and civil rights (Azwar & Kho, 2022). In particular, Pradhana and Tania (2021), observe that hashtag activism is a popular means for collective affirmation of a protest "to increase awareness of resistance". In addition, Fernandez (2020) conducted a study on hate speech patterns and incitement among government and opposition supporters in Malaysia after the fall of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government at the beginning of the pandemic. He concluded that there was a high probability of the role of youth and mass media being utilized during protests against the pandemic to support or oppose the actions of a handful of parliamentarians in overthrowing the government without going through the electoral process.

In the context of protest narratives, pandemics, and political communication between youth and government in developing countries, Coman et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of COVID-19 as a political crisis and its implications on various democratic values, which have introduced new dimensions to political rhetoric, good governance, and political communication. Therefore, the discourse and discussion surrounding socio-legal rules pertaining to movement control and relevant practices such as face mask usage, physical distancing, curfews, mandatory vaccination, and the shift from physical to virtual lifestyles, had significant implications on the nature of political communication between citizens and governments, ranging from creating new health concerns to instigating political propaganda, particularly in limited democratic systems. Metzger (2014) argues that the impact we observe of the interaction between youth identity, social media, protests and limited democratic space in developing countries on the general understanding of political communication manipulated by political actors is a continuation of Herman and Chomsky's (2010) concept of "manufacturing consent". This is because mass media communication operates as an ideological institution of power through market power, internal assumptions formed in public consciousness, and regulations related to information censorship mechanisms without the need for violent action. Therefore, the contradiction between the narrative of youth protest and anti-government protest during a pandemic, which has become a model of political propaganda communication to form "manufactured consent" to influence public opinion during a pandemic, should be studied. By focusing on the Hong Kong and Malaysian experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article examines the contradiction of

protest and anti-protest narratives by youths during the pandemic in a limited democratic space as a means of highlighting a new avenue of political communication.

Youth Protest in Malaysia by MUDA

Although Sulaiman and Khalid (2017), argue that street demonstrations like the ones that have occurred in Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines in the past, are unlikely to upset the political regime in Malaysia, evidence points out that this is untrue as the discussion below suggests that the Malaysian population will react when they perceive injustices to their basic rights. At the same time, the government has no choice but to respond to the reaction of the population. On 30 July 2021, the *Parti Ikatan Demokratik Rakyat Malaysia* (MUDA), a political party comprised of youth, organized a demonstration at Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur demanding the resignation of former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (Malaysiakini, 2021). The protest was led by Syed Saddiq, the then president of MUDA. The protesters adopted the slogan “*Kerajaan Gagal*” (Failed government) and used black clothing and flags as symbols of their dissatisfaction with the government’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the protesters demanded that Muhyiddin Yassin permit the continuation of the parliamentary session and provide automatic loan moratoriums for financially-struggling Malaysians (Loheswar, 2021). In response, the Malaysian government expressed concerns that such protests and rallies, held during a pandemic, would exacerbate the state’s security (AstroAwani, 2021b). Furthermore, the police announced that those involved in the demonstration at Dataran Merdeka would be summoned and subject to investigation as they failed to maintain social distancing regulations that were put in place by the authority, despite adhering to the standard operating procedures (SOP) during protesting (AstroAwani, 2021a). The anti-protest narratives asserted by the Malaysian government were attributed to wanting to reduce the risk of infection with the virus.

New National Security Law and Youth Protest in Hong Kong

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Hong Kong has had a significant impact on the pre-existing ongoing protests (Ismangil & Lee, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hong Kong was in the midst of its largest-ever protest, with the youth primarily leading the movement against the proposed extradition bill, which aimed to permit criminal suspects to be extradited to mainland China, as it was perceived as a violation of the “One Country Two Systems” principle. These demonstrations were mainly held on university campuses, which were later referred to as a refuge for criminals by the Hong Kong police, having labelled the protesters as such under the New National Security Law (NNSL) (The Guardian, 2019). The combination of the introduction of this law with the proposed extradition bill led to a wave of youth-led protests in Hong Kong, which eventually turned violent. As the COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak, the Hong Kong government implemented lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus. However, Hongkongers claimed that these measures and government-imposed restrictions were being used to suppress ongoing protests (Law, 2021). Some news making institutions noted that the social movements and protests that had gained traction in recent years were temporarily or permanently halted due to the COVID-19 outbreak and related government-imposed restrictions (Wong, 2020). Hong Kong youth have argued that the implementation of restrictions by the government was implicitly and strategically used to deter anti-NNSL protests, which were gaining

momentum at the time, ultimately positioning the government's actions as covert violation of their rights as Hongkongers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The protests in Hong Kong and Malaysia highlight the newly dynamized interaction between the public and the government during the pandemic. The New Social Movement (NSM) theory offers a framework to elucidate the nature of this interaction, as well as to explore the underlying causal factors of social movements and protests. NSM theory is distinct from traditional social movement theory, as it is tailored to the study of contemporary societies, particularly those in the post-industrial era and is therefore uniquely suited for this research (Flynn, 2014).

Scholars have delved into the concept of new social movements since the late 1960s, specifically noting their emphasis on formal institutional dialogue, which differs from the prior focus of social movements through economic lenses, and instead centres around lifestyle, ethical and identity-oriented discourses (Calhoun, 1993). This shift establishes a clear demarcation between the traditional social movement paradigm, which leans towards socialism, and the new social movement paradigm. Scholars often evoke the term “non-institutional politics” when discussing new social movements, as they operate outside of the established formal institutions, expressing little regard for their legitimacy. The NSM framework acknowledges the diversity of potential types of problems addressed by these movements, which do not fit easily into the public or private realms, instead being collectively discussed by the actors involved (Offe, 2019).

While the NSM framework still acknowledges economic aspects, the nature of the actors, values, and modes of actions taken by these groups remain distinct. These movements are defined by the issues they address, rather than by socioeconomic demographics, and economic problems are just one possibility among many issues. The issues taken up by NSM, such as peace, autonomy, and identity, may include economic factors. A clear distinction between the traditional and new paradigms of social movement theory can be made by examining the issues encompassed by the NSM framework. Table 1 provides a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of the NSM theory.

Table 1: Characteristics of new social movement (Adapted from Offe, 1985)

Characteristics of New Social Movement	
• Actor	Mobilized collectively
• Issues	Preservation of peace, identity, environment, human rights
• Values	Personal autonomy, identity and resisting centralized control
• Modes of actions	(a) Internal; informal as well as spontaneous (b) External; political protests based on demands formulated in negative terms

By analysing Table 1's portrayal of the main features of the NSM paradigm as derived from Offe (1985), it becomes evident that the protests in both Hong Kong and Malaysia align with the parties, issues, values and modes of actions outlined. In Malaysia, the protests revolve around the centralized control imposed by the government, with negative narratives motivating the political protests being the government's perceived failure to manage the pandemic. Conversely, in Hong Kong, the protests concentrate on citizens' human rights, contesting the new law enacted

by mainland China, namely the NNSL. However, the protests in both regions demonstrate comparable modes of actions, both externally and internally. NSM theory provides an explicit and implicit explanation of the protests in both regions within the framework of this study, which aims to compare the protest and anti-protest during the pandemic in Hong Kong and Malaysia with a particular focus on youth narratives.

Table 2: Application of theory on case study

Main characteristics of New Social Movement		
• Place	Malaysia	Hong Kong
• Actor	Youth groups collectively	Youth groups collectively
• Issues	Movement Control Movement Order (PKP) implemented by the government as a defence mechanism to the right of assembly	Opposing the centralized control from Mainland China & protect Hong Kong identity
• Values	Personal autonomy Inner; Digital space	Personal autonomy <i>Dalaman; Ruang digital</i>
• Mode of actions	External; political protests based on demands formulated in Internal negative terms	External; political protests based on demands formulated in negative terms

Table 2 presents an applied demonstration of Offe’s (1985) theory contextualized within Malaysia and Hong Kong. The protest groups in both countries exhibit similarities in terms of the actors, values and modes of action employed. These similarities reflect the fact that, despite the diverse issues raised by youths in support of the right to protest, the practices adopted by both parties remain relevant and adaptable. As previously stated, NSM theory places heightened importance on problems, issues, and values expressed rather than socioeconomic demographics. By applying this theory, a more explicit comparison of the youth’s narratives in Hong Kong and Malaysia will be presented, facilitating comprehension of the message conveyed by youth groups who support the protest movement against the government, even in the midst of a pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pandemic Protest and Political Communication

There is an expansive archive of studies that discuss protests as an instrument of expressing the people's dissatisfaction with the government. However, there is an extant vacuum of discourse on protests that happen during a pandemic. Presently, there are four hypothetical developments of protests during a pandemic that could exist if the situation persists (Metternich, 2020). These being the rise of protest groups to defend the government -banned right of assembly, autocratic governments seizing the opportunity to take advantage of national emergencies to create policies that suppress the freedom of the people, protest groups losing momentum due to social imprisonment policies, and lastly, existing problems that are related pandemics such as economic, social and health leading to greater political mobilization.

Gerbaudo (2020) argued that protests during a pandemic reveal the true nature of the COVID-19 emergency as political suspension, consequently increasing the possibility of social confrontation, bringing forward western countries as example. Political communication between the people and the government is also seen as closely linked to this phenomenon. Widman (2020) presented two perspectives on the use of emotional rhetoric in political communication between

governments and their constituents during the COVID-19 pandemic. These perspectives included (1) the tendency for populist political parties to communicate about the pandemic in a manner that either obscured or downplayed its severity, and (2) the correlation between the widespread dissemination of populist messages and changes in people's emotional responses to the pandemic. The present study incorporated these perspectives into the analytical framework for examining protest and anti-protest narratives among youth in Hong Kong and Malaysia during the pandemic.

Youth and Protest

Social Movements and protests refer to organized collective actions carried out by a significant number of individuals with the ultimate goal of engendering social change (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Scott and Marshall posit that social movements play an essential role in promoting democracy and effecting positive change in society. Diani (1992) views social movements as informal organizations that accept and promote various forms of organization. Johnston (2014) contends that social movements are organized by groups of varying sizes, structures and complexities. Moreover, these movements typically have strong relationships and are interconnected with other social movements and groups., Millward and Takhar (2019) assert that social movements involve political and collective action to support the struggle against oppression. While the concrete definition of social movements remains inconclusive, with different scholars holding various assumptions and definitions they nevertheless are seen to be generally associated with political opportunity.

The involvement of young people has been observed as a significant factor in the success of social movements that have had a notable impact on human history, as highlighted by Constanza-Chock (2012). Constanza-Chock identifies five primary perspectives on the involvement of youth in social movement, namely (1) youth can collectively act as agents of change, (2) youth play a significant role in shaping media practices within social movements, (3) youth are effective in interacting with each other (4) youth social movements are increasingly becoming transnational, and (5) youth groups can form sustainable relationship with social movements. Youth groups are, observably, an essential agent in creating a more just and equitable society, possessing a strong affinity for engendering sufficient pressure to evoke social change.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, distributing questionnaires to collect primary information while also conducting content analysis on newspapers, therefore including both primary and secondary sources of information. The primary source of this study was gathered from 50 members of youth protesters both from Malaysia and Hong Kong. They were given a semi-structured questionnaire geared towards determining their narratives on protests and anti-protest as contrasting political communication. In alignment with ethical considerations, their identities are kept hidden and were coded with labels from M1 to M25 for protesters in Malaysia and HK1 to HK25 for protesters in Hong Kong. The usage of an online chat platform called "Telegram" was used to connect with respondents from Hong Kong as there is an increasing fear for youth from Hong Kong in discussing sensitive issues such as the protests due to the

implementation of the NNSL. The secondary resource used for this study is a collection of newspapers and reports gathered from Malaysia and Hong Kong. This study also incorporated the analysis from scholarly written works into its data sources. To ensure the credibility of this study, potential bias in news reporting was considered. Therefore, multiple news sources were included in the analysis. Additionally, media releases from the Hong Kong and Malaysian governments were examined to identify any anti-protest narratives during the pandemic. Content analysis was employed to analyse the data collected from the respondents. The data gathered was then categorized into five sub-themes based on the NSM, being place, actor, issues, values, and modes of actions. Through this categorization, this study provides a conclusion on the relationship between protest and anti-protest rhetoric during pandemics, particularly by looking into youth's narratives as contrasting political communication.

FINDINGS

This study aims to compare the narratives of protest and anti-protest among the youth in Malaysia and Hong Kong, by analysing the government's stance on prohibiting protests during the pandemic and the arguments presented by protest groups advocating for their right to protest, with a focus on the contrasting political communication in these two regions. The categorization and analysis were conducted based on Offe's (1985) main characteristics of NSM of five themes: time, space, actors, political system and issues, enabling the comparison between the two regions, and ultimately establishing a conclusive framework that addresses the research questions. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of protests and anti-protests during pandemic and provide insights towards better development of policies to address such situations.

Time

Within the context of this study, the concept of time pertains to the questions of whether it is appropriate to hold protests and assemblies during a pandemic. Respondents were surveyed to determine their views on the matter, and their responses were grouped into two categories: "Yes" and "No". Interestingly, the majority of respondents (96% of both from Malaysian and Hong Kong's youths) expressed a preference for the right to protests even during a pandemic. However, there were a few dissenting voices, with three respondents indicating that while they supported to right to protest, they believed that large social assemblies during a pandemic would increase the risk of COVID-19 transmissions which could then be used by the government as a pretext for implementing further restrictions on freedom and rights to protests. These findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Propensity of suitability of protests and rallies during pandemic

Response	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	23	24	47	94
No	2	1	3	6

The concerns expressed by the Malaysian government on the rally organized by MUDA in Dataran Merdeka were grounded in wanting to reduce the risk and spread of Covid-19 infections. Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the former Deputy Prime Minister, highlighted the risk associated with large gatherings and expressed concern about participants potentially becoming the carriers of the virus (MyMetro, 2021). Following the rally, the government responded by enforcing stricter measures, with police being instructed to investigate those involved in the rallies organized by the MUDA party. Datuk Seri Hamzah, the former Home Minister, also announced the ban on massive assemblies due to the danger posed by the COVID-19 epidemic and the spread of the Delta variant (Utusan Melayu, 2021).

In contrast, the Hong Kong police have rejected requests for public assemblies citing the increasing prevalence of COVID-19 cases, resulting in the public expressing outrage over the government's seemingly opportunistic use of the pandemic and the lockdown measurement as means to curb political demonstrations (Wong et al., 2021). Overall, media coverage in Malaysia and Hong Kong on the appropriateness of holding rallies and protests tend to take an anti-protest stance through emphasizing the potential for the spread of the virus and the resulting danger to public health caused by such protests.

Space

The concept of space pertains to the physical or digital locations where protests are conducted. In order to explore the preferences of youth in expressing their grievances towards the government, respondents were asked about their chosen space for protests. The findings are presented in Table 4, which shows that the majority of Malaysian respondents, specifically 9 out of 10, prefer to engage in physical protests as opposed to digital ones. Conversely, Hong Kong youths tend to use digital platforms as their preferred space for protest. However, the results indicate that there is an equal preference for both physical and digital spaces among respondents, with 50% of respondents choosing each option. It is noteworthy that these findings reflect the current trend among youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong in utilizing either physical or digital space for political expression.

Table 4: Youth's protest space in Malaysia and Hong Kong

Response	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Total	Percentage (%)
Physical	24	1	25	50
Digital	1	24	25	50

When holding protests in physical spaces, one is subject to the government's authority to reject public gatherings and assemblies during pandemics. Media coverage often highlights governmental warnings regarding the risks of public rallies during periods of high COVID-19 cases. For instance, the Malaysian government has imposed a ban on public assemblies and has threatened harsh measures against those who violate the order (MyMetro, 2021). In contrast, digital spaces have become an increasingly popular option as protest spaces for Malaysian youths. Newspapers that tend to support government narratives often convey the failure of anti-government protests by highlighting instances where only a few people attended the rallies and previous unsuccessful protests (Asliza, 2021). A Chinese government-owned newspaper in Hong

Kong, Ta Kung Pao, attributed the causes of protests to external forces during the peak of the protests (McLaughlin, 2021). Is it worth to note that the NNSL enforced by Mainland China on Hong Kong prohibits any form of assembly, and government reports, similar to those in Malaysia, continue to highlight the risks of rising COVID-19 cases if public rallies or protests are held.

Actor

Drawing from the characteristics of NSM theory, the actors involved in protest are defined in terms of their group involvement and modes of protest. In this study, youth narratives are analysed as a means of exploring political communication between anti-government protest groups. The youth are classified into two categories; those who prefer collective activism and those who prefer individual action. As indicated in Table 5, the majority of the respondents (48) believed that collective activism is the most effective way to protest during a pandemic. However, two respondents argued that individual action is more appropriate during a pandemic due to the risk of COVID-19 infection, and suggest that digital space can be used to express dissatisfaction with the government.

Table 5: Actor's mode in Malaysia and Hong Kong protest

Response	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Total	Percentage (%)
Collective	23	25	48	95
Individual	2	0	2	5

Digital news reports tend to disseminate and re-emphasise the government's narrative, emphasizing its control over youth groups that gather in public spaces. In Malaysia, news reports on the government's stance portray it as being receptive to the collective voice of the people. For instance, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Ismail Sabri Yaakob expressed the government's willingness to consider the opinions and voices of the people to improve its weaknesses, but discouraged youth groups from protesting on the streets as it would increase the risk of COVID-19 infection in Malaysia (Raja, 2021). However, the government's response to protests in Kuala Lumpur is reportedly significantly firmer than this receptive outset might suggest, with digital reports indicating that the police tried to identify the organizers of the rally for violating the Prevention and Control Infectious Diseases (National Rehabilitation Plan) Regulations 2021 (Berita Harian, 2021). In Hong Kong, the government detained 47 activists on charges of anti-government protests, accusing them of conspiring to overthrow the government (BBC, 2021). Government-leaning news portals in both Hong Kong and Malaysia tend to propagate anti-protest narratives.

Political System

The political systems of countries play a crucial role in shaping the government's response to youth protests. In this study, respondents were asked about their perception on the significance of the political systems in Malaysia and Hong Kong and their impact on governmental actions towards youth groups protesting during the pandemic. Their responses were categorized as either "Yes" or "No" depending on the inclination of their answers. The results indicated that all respondents acknowledged the impact of political systems in shaping the government's response

to protest as well as the anti-protest narrative propagated by the government during the pandemic. The political system in Malaysia, for instance, is characterized by a strong centralized government with a control over freedom of expression, leading to various actions against protesters. In contrast, Hong Kong's political system is characterized by a greater degree of autonomy, but the implementation of NNSL led to harsher actions against protesters. Overall, the political systems of countries are vital determinants of governmental actions towards youth protest and were considered in analysing responses related to the study.

Table 6: Perception that political system affected government's actions

Response	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	25	25	50	100
No	0	0	0	0

Hong Kong and Malaysia each exercise different systems. Although Hong Kong was allowed a degree of autonomy from Mainland China under the Hong Kong Basic Law (1997) and adopted the "One Country Two Systems" principle, the NNSL introduced in 2020 has transformed the political system to be more akin to an autocratic system that aligns with Beijing's values (BBC, 2020). The Beijing government has taken a more aggressive stance against any form of protest and has put pressure on the Hong Kong population to remain loyal to Mainland China's rule (Human Rights Watch, 2021). On the other hand, the quality and nature of democracy in Malaysia remains the subject of many debates among its people. Some argue that democracy in Malaysia has collapsed (Fareez, 2021), paving the way for discourse on whether Malaysia practices true democracy or Quasi-democracy. Although there exist significant differences between the political systems in Malaysia and Hong Kong, these differences serve as the basis of the government's actions against the youth who gather to protest.

Issues

Both anti-government protests in Malaysia and Hong Kong share the common goal of opposing centralized control by their respective governments. However, these two protests raised different issues. In this study, 42% of respondents believed that the governments used the pandemic as an excuse to impede or restrict the people's right to assemble and protest, which is the highest reason compared to the other two reasons. Meanwhile, 38% of respondents believed that the protests aimed to exert pressure on the government for their inability to manage the COVID-19 cases in Malaysia and Hong Kong. The reason for personal autonomy was identified by only 10% of the respondents. Table 7 presents the percentage differences of the issues brought upon by the protest groups in Malaysia and Hong Kong during the pandemic.

Table 7: Issues raised by protest groups in Malaysia and Hong Kong

Response	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Total	Percentage (%)
• Government failure in managing COVID-19 cases	18	1	19	38
• Pandemic as an excuse to ban public's right to assemble by the government	5	16	21	42
• Personal autonomy	2	8	10	20

DISCUSSION

Youth protests groups across Malaysia and Hong Kong share in their desire to express dissatisfaction towards the government through organizing social gatherings. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to increased cases and the subsequent implication of movement control orders, the government prioritized health concerns over the right to assembly, resulting in clashes between those who support assembly rights and those who prioritize health and safety during the pandemic and lockdown periods. Currently, there is no existing work that examines youth narratives supporting protest movements against anti-protest narratives through political communication during pandemics. Therefore, by taking into account the development of the political situation in Malaysia and Hong Kong being cantered around public communication between protest groups and the government, this study highlights a clash of perspectives between protest groups who support the right to assemble against the anti-protest narrative raised by the government, and is appropriately divided into three main elements based on the findings.

Firstly, the case studies exhibited in this study looked at the context of protest as a political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic that sees the clash of two different political messages. Secondly, anti-NNSL protests in Hong Kong and “failed government” rallies by the MUDA party raised the themes of youth, identity, and political communication. Thirdly, this study examined the differences between the political system of democracy in Malaysia and the increasingly eroded democracy in Hong Kong due to increased intervention from Mainland China. The Movement Control Order (PKP) and the Lockdown Order implemented in Malaysia and Hong Kong became a political instrument which was criticized as an opportunistic restriction of the people's right to assemble. Furthermore, the communication among the youth who support the protest movement is prominently observed in digital spaces. The issue at hand could be described as manifesting in two different situations: in Malaysia, the protest organized by MUDA aimed to express dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic, while in Hong Kong, the government used the pandemic as a pretext to suppress all forms of protest.

Previous studies (Lipsky, 1968) position protest as an important element in a political system that appoints the voice of the people as the main instrument in opposing government policies or actions in a country. Based on the study, a discrepancy can be observed between the narrative of the government and that of the protesting youth groups, particularly in their stance on mobilizing protests during the pandemic. The study analysed five constant variables, namely time, space, actors, political system, and issues, and found inconsistencies between these variables and the narratives of the two groups.

The most important element in the NSM is the assertion that actors do not have to rely on the political spectrum or socioeconomic demographics in which they find themselves, but are more cantered on the issues raised (Offe, 1985). Offe (1985) proposed that new social movements emerge in response to specific issues. This aligns with the results of this study, which indicate that the issues raised by youth in Malaysia and Hong Kong serve as the driving force behind protest groups. The main narrative centres around resistance to centralized control implemented by the government during the pandemic.

The present study identified that youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong both agreed on the mobilization of protests during pandemic while on the government side, an opposing stance can be prominently seen, regardless of country. To express their dissatisfaction with the government's mishandling of the pandemic, the youth believed that protests were necessary even though they were at risk of contracting COVID-19. The government's failure in managing the pandemic served as the narrative for the mobilization of protests, as per the findings of this study. Here, it can be seen that the youths prioritize platforming the voice of the people against the government and centralized control over their own health. According to digital press reports, the governments' actions in Hong Kong and Malaysia opposed the mobilization of protests during the pandemic by using the pandemic itself as an excuse to block public gatherings. The contradiction in narrative is evident, as the government prioritizes health safety over the right to assemble during the pandemic, while youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong are willing to participate in protests despite the risk of COVID-19 infection, with their desire to voice their dissatisfaction overriding their concerns for personal health.

Regarding preferred protest space, there are differences in terms of the use of digital or physical space between youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Here, it is observed that the youths oppose the government's action by not only protesting physically in public places and city capitals, but also by transposing their rallies to digital spaces to ensure their voices are heard. For example, youths in Hong Kong resorted to new alternatives by voicing their protests against the government on platforms such as Telegram and LIHKG applications replacing the use of Facebook and Twitter with better security measurements in place (Frosina, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that the youths maximized the use of both spaces to clearly convey their opposition to the government.

For someone to engage in individual protests, they require involvement in organizations with political interests (Schussman & Soule, 2005). The existence of social media as a platform facilitates the safety of individuals to protest individually. However, the study also found that youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong are more inclined to collectively show their protest against the government. This can be considered a form of personal security as doing so individually carries a higher risk of being arrested, especially in Hong Kong with new security laws introduced allowing the government to arrest any individual involved with any form of anti-government speech or action. On the other hand, the government possesses the ability to deter such behaviour through threats, such as issuing warnings against collective gatherings during the pandemic, stating that youth groups who move collectively could be the main contributor to the increase in COVID-19 cases due to the rallies held. This is exemplified by the media reports in Malaysia where the government expressed that the rally was detrimental to the country's efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Mohamad Shofi, 2021).

Interestingly, youths across both countries agreed that the political system was also a key determinant in deciding the governments' actions against the youth groups who went to public to protest. This can be explained by the existence of the new legislation in Hong Kong that is more aggressive in taking action against any form of protest and anti-government sentiment, compared to the government actions in Malaysia. Although digital reports indicate that both governments in Malaysia and Hong Kong took action against protest groups, the diverging

political systems created a noticeable gap in the severity of governmental actions against those who gathered.

The study's findings reveal a common consensus among youths in Malaysia and Hong Kong regarding their perception of the governments' opportunistic spinning of the narrative of the pandemic, strategically using this excuse as a reason to restrict protests and the right to assemble, effectively suppressing democratic movements. This resulted in subsequent loss of trust in the government's voice and chosen actions of controlling the pandemic. The youth consensus was that the narrative presented by the government was manipulative and unreliable, as any pandemic-related reason was seen as a pretext to restrict individual rights.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the two-way political communication between the youth and the government regarding protests held during the pandemic, encompassing the narratives of both parties. The protests examined are both in physical and online spaces. Interestingly, in the physical space, leadership is an important factor in mobilizing social movements in both Malaysia and Hong Kong. In contrast, leadership is almost non-existent in the online social movement space in the same places. According to Kamaruzzaman (2022) social movements in the online arena become horizontal as protest is dominated by everyone who is online without the need of a specific leader. Since the main aim of this study is to gain insight into the narratives of youth in Malaysia and Hong Kong towards protest and anti-protest sentiments during the pandemic, it can be concluded that there is a clash of political messages that exist between protest groups and the government. This study finds that the youth sees protests as a means to challenge the governments' centralized control during the pandemic. In Malaysia and Hong Kong, government measures such as lockdowns and movement control orders were viewed by the youths as a government defence mechanism to suppress their right to gather and voice their discontent against government policies and inefficiency during the pandemic. Despite significant differences in the political systems, both governments in Malaysia and Hong Kong perceive protests as a threat, either to public health or to their own survival.

The study highlights the role of media in shaping people's understanding of government policies and the narrative conflict between the government and the youth regarding the implementation of lockdown during the pandemic. The government used public health safety as the main narrative to justify their opposition to the youth's protests and accusation of using pandemics as an excuse to restrict their right to assemble. However, the youth believed that the government had an implicit political message behind these policies. The clash of different debates between the government and the youth indicates a conflict of political messages. Existing studies of political communication often have an analytical tendency that superficially looks at the fundamental differences between the actions of democratic and semi-democratic rulers. Nevertheless, the system of interaction between the community and the government has showcased the diversity of the findings of political communication interaction through media observation.

The study's findings suggest that the interaction of political communication between the government and the youth is diverse, not only in democratic countries but also in non-semi-democratic ones, providing a significant finding. This implies that the narrative of youth's actions

towards the government is varied, even in countries with similar political systems, such as Hong Kong and Malaysia. However, the study found that the role played by youth groups in bringing about the pro-protest narrative remains consistent. The diversity of the findings highlights the importance of considering the unique cultural, political, and social contexts in which protests take place, and the various factors that may influence the interaction between the government and the youth. It is of importance to note that the involvement of youth in social movements has created sufficient pressure on both the Malaysian and Hong Kong governments which forced them to respond against any anti-government sentiment.

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