A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHINESE WEIBO POSTS ABOUT 2019-20 HONG KONG DEMONSTRATIONS

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# Abstract

The author investigated the framing process of the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest movement and the prevalence of news frames identified in earlier studies on political framing. The characteristics of each message were also investigated. The author content analyzed 502 Weibo posts collected from three Chinese state-owned media: *People's Daily* (人民日报)*, CCTV* (央视新闻)*, and *Global Times* (环球时报). According to this study's findings, certain events in the period surrounding the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations followed a four-step framing process: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, motivational framing and framing of results. The results also showed that, overall, the law and order, crime and justice frame occurred most frequently, followed by the morality, cultural identity, security and defense and quality of life frame respectively. Posts with high engagement tended to embrace the following characteristics: short and concise content, strong symbolic representations, low-risk mobilization, presence of strong emotional components and visualization elements.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## INTRODUCTION

Social media are increasingly important for political and social activism. The Chinese government, in particular, exerts influence on the media environment in addition to its influence on politics and economics. On one hand, China uses different social media platforms to listen to publics in order to establish good relationships between the government and citizens. On the other hand, social media are used as tools to frame messages in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, moral evaluation or to cultivate consensus on political issues.

China has been aggressively stirring up nationalist and anti-Western sentiment because of the ongoing protests in Hong Kong. The 2019-20 Hong Kong protest issue can be traced back to March of 2019 when the first demonstrations started in Hong Kong against an extradition bill that would allow authorities to detain and extradite people wanted in mainland China. Protests have since continued throughout the whole summer, and are now about much more than the extradition bill itself. People are calling for greater freedom and democracy in Hong Kong and for resistance against political influence from the Beijing government (Myers & Mozur, 2019).

Online discussions are overwhelming, and the topic of the Hong Kong extradition bill demonstrations has been dominating the trending streams since July on China's popular social media platforms. On TikTok, one of the most popular short video apps in mainland China, there are different videos showing violent incidents in Hong Kong that are being reposted thousands of times. On WeChat, one of the most popular social media platforms in mainland China, articles related to the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests are viewed over a hundred thousand times. Chinese officials are trying to frame the demonstrations as a prelude

to terrorism and they describe the protesters as so-called "thugs" who are tearing the nation apart (Myers & Mozur, 2019).

This research will solely focus on Weibo, a Chinese social media service similar to Twitter. The narratives that are spread in daily discussion on Weibo are comparable to those on other platforms. Like Twitter, Weibo also has the function of hashtags and can show trending topics. The Chinese government joined the online discussion by promoting several hashtags like "Protect Hong Kong", "Officers, We Support You." Using these slogans, Chinese Party newspaper *People's Daily* also issued an illustration which features three police officers carrying weapons and protective screens. Behind them are protesters, and above them is China's Five-stared Red Flag. Other stories showing violence against the Hong Kong police force were also posted by the Chinese government. People in mainland China responded to these hashtags and stories by expressing their anger about Hong Kong protesters and supporting the idea that Hong Kong is always a part of China (Koetse, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to provide public relations and social media professionals insight into how the Chinese government used Weibo to frame the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations and what are the characteristics of those Weibo posts.

## BACKGROUND: CHINESE MEDIA

**Chinese Media System**

According to Siebert's *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), the government can use mass media especially the press to achieve social control. Authoritarian countries exert absolute political restrains on media (Siebert, 1956). China has a strong control over the press, especially in the era of traditional media. The main function of the press is to support government administration. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has been influencing media through ownership and censorship. For instance, the CPC has maintained ownership of the largest newspapers in China, *People's Daily*, since its launch in 1949. The CPC does not

own every media source in China, but its propaganda department is in charge of censorship. On the other hand, the media themselves will conduct self-censorship as a response (Luo, 2015).

Based on Siebert's *Four Theories of the Press*, Ostini and Fung (2002) developed a new model of national media system. This model combines the political systems (democratic and authoritarian) with journalistic values (liberal and conservative). The four dimensions of the model are democratic-liberal, democratic-conservative, authoritarian-liberal, and authoritarian-conservative. China belongs to the last category, in which media are officially controlled and journalistic values are marked by lack of freedom of speech (Ostini & Fung, 2002).

However, with the development of social media, the environment of Chinese journalism and political atmosphere has been changed. One of the impacts is that social networking sites are more popular platforms for social issue discussion than news websites and traditional media. Because of this, traditional media have tried to follow the trend and regain the influence that they have lost (Huang & Lu, 2017). For instance, China Central Television (CCTV) News center launched its official account on Weibo in November 2012. This transformation allows CCTV to provide audience with news, collect feedback from the audience, and conduct investigations, while encouraging the audience to interact with the official account (Huang & Liu, 2017).

More importantly, social media have gradually changes the way in which Chinese government communicate with citizens (Shao & Wang, 2017). The central government uses social media to disseminate new policies and interact with citizens. Following the lead of the central government, local governments begin to utilize social media platforms to expand their audience base. As of June 2019, 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities

directly under the central government in mainland China have launched microblogs

(Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, 2019).

**Chinese Social Media**

With the development of Internet and under the influence of Western social media, China gradually had its own social media. Different types of social media have different characteristics and users. The first type of social media is social networking sites like WeChat. WeChat started as an instant messenger and now includes multiple features like social networking (WeChat Moments where users can post pictures and short videos), mobile payment (WePay), gaming, content network (Official Accounts), etc. The second type of social media is micro blogging platforms like Sina Weibo. Weibo started as China's Twitter and now is very different. Besides following other users and publishing posts under 2,000 Chinese characters, users can now perform online broadcasting, buy and sell products, start polls, play games and make money via ads. This is usually where the breaking news surfaces (Hou et al., 2018)

Weibo is often compared with WeChat because they are the most popular social media platforms in China. By nature, these two are different. A WeChat user is connected with much more family members, friends, colleagues and business associates than a Weibo user. Therefore, it's not surprising to see higher engagement and more monthly active users on WeChat. However, Weibo is a more public platform and most published posts are visible to the public. While WeChat posts in Moments are only visible to mutually connected users. According to a survey, the main purpose of using Weibo is to get hot news in time while the main purpose of using WeChat is to interact with friends. Besides news websites and news apps, Chinese netizens tend to obtain news from Weibo (Gan, 2018).

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with a definition of framing and framing processes. Next framing within political communication and different political frame schemas are examined. Then this literature review investigates what factors can contribute to successful online movements. After that, political participation is examined in consideration of Chinese culture background. Finally, a case study on how content analysis can be applied to framing analysis concludes the literature review.

**Framing**

For decades, framing theory has been recognized as a useful paradigm for examining the strategic creation of public messages and audience responses in public relations (Hallahan, 1999). The concept of "framing" was first introduced by social scientists Goffman and Bateson (1974), meaning individual or groups "to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions." Since then, this concept has been applied to a wide range of disciplines and across a broad spectrum of communication situations. Hallahan (1999) identified 7 distinct types of framing which are applicable to public relations practice, depending on the circumstances. These involve the framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news.

Researchers concerned with social movements have employed framing as a tool for analyzing public debates on issues, especially the framing process of an issue. An issue is a dispute between two or more parties, and usually result in extensive public discussion. At the heart of most issues is how a particular problem or dispute should be understood or interpreted (Hallahan, 1999). To apply the framing theory to practice, Snow and Benford (1988) suggested social movements engage in three distinct framing processes. Diagnostic framing is the first element which involves identification of an event or aspect of social life

as problematic and in need of changes. Prognostic framing proposes solutions to the problem and identifies strategies, tactics and targets as well. Motivational framing represents a call to action or rationale for engaging in corrective action.

**Political Framing**

In the field of political science, framing theory has a long history of explaining how ideas and language are constructed into political action. Entman (1993, p.52) broadly defined framing as the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality" in order to "make them more salient in a communicating context." Focusing mainly on news media, previous research showed that journalists and editors apply selection and framing as a means of emphasizing particular events or stories over others, influenced by factors such as social assumptions and political views. (Ferrero, 2013; Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). This theory has supported the idea that activist groups operating via social media typically employ selection and silence as techniques for emphasizing certain messages or frames over others. Through acts of framing, politicians or public organizations select and add salience on certain ideas. They make use of framing to make favorable interpretations of particular issues or particular aspects of an issue. (Abdul-Nabi, 2015).

Schön and Rein (1996) are known for bringing the idea of framing into the policy analytic field. Based on their work, Hulst and Yanow (2016) continued to explore the framing of political issues. They suggested that framing is carried out through three distinctive acts: sense-making; naming, which includes selecting and categorizing; and storytelling. Sense-making is a process in which politicians try to cope with ambiguity and construct a clear definition of the problem. By defining the issue as problematic, politicians will locate the issue at the wider political agenda. Naming is fundamentally about highlighting certain problems or certain aspects of the problem. It is used to relate the problem into socio-political context and politicizing it into a public issue that necessitate

pubic intervention. Storytelling moves beyond problem definition by telling stories behind the problem such as the history, going back to the moment when all was well. To make stories more persuasive, policy-relevant actors may also explain why this issue matters and what they fear will happen in the future.

Although researchers have identified the definition of framing from different perspectives, there is not yet a standard set with which to measure frames both within and across political issues. Shanto Iyengar (1991) identified episodic frames from thematic frames. The episodic frame "depicts issues in terms of specific instances" (Iyengar, 1991, p.8), for instance, coverage of a terrorist bombing. While thematic frame "depicts political issues more broadly and abstractly by placing them in some appropriate context – historical, geographical or otherwise" (Iyengar, 1991, p.10). Later Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) developed another classification in a content analysis study about framing of European Political Meeting. They identified the following kinds of frames: attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic consequences. Such general schemas facilitate invaluable insights into high-level patterns of political communication.

Other frame schemas are issue specific. For example, researchers took nurse practitioners as an example and investigated how political framing could be applied to the issues of practice and licensure (Smith, Buchanan & Cloutier, 2019). These issue-specific schemas are wonderfully detailed, but cannot be used to examine patterns and test hypotheses across issues.

Boydstun, Gross, Resnik and Smith (2013) established a Policy Frames Codebook, which is a general system for categorizing frames across policy issues. The codebook contains 14 categories of frame "dimensions" that are intended to be applied to any political issues and in any communication context including social media posts. (1) Economic frames refer to the costs, benefits or monetary implications of the issue. (2) Capacity and resources

frames involve the lack of availability of physical, geographical, spatial, human and financial resources, or the capacity of existing systems and resources to implement or carry out policy goals. (3) Morality frames include any perspective that is compelled by religious doctrine or interpretation, duty, honor, righteousness or any other sense of ethics or social responsibility. (4) Fairness and equality frames refer to equality or inequality with which laws, punishment, rewards and resources are applies or distributed among individuals or groups. (5) Constitutionality and jurisprudence frames involve the constrains imposed on or freedoms granted to individuals, government and corporations via laws. (6) Policy prescription and evaluation frames include particular policies proposed for addressing an identified problem, and figuring out if certain policies will work, or if existing policies are effective. (7) Law and order, crime and justice frames include specific policies in practice and their enforcement, incentives, and implications, such as stories about enforcement and interpretation of laws by individuals and law enforcement, breaking laws, loopholes, sentencing and punishment. (8) Security and defense frames include security, threats to security, and protection of one's person, family, in-group, nation, etc. (9) Health and safety frames refer to healthcare access and effectiveness, illness, disease, sanitation, obesity, mental health effects, prevention of or perpetuation of gun violence, infrastructure and building safety. (10) Quality of life frames involve the effects of a policy on individuals' wealth, mobility, access to resources, happiness, social structures, ease of day-to-day routines, quality of community life, etc. (11) Cultural identity frames include the social norms, trends, values and customs constituting cultures. (12) Public opinion frames include references to general social attitudes, polling and demographic information, as well as implied or actual consequences of diverging from or getting ahead of public opinion or polls. (13) External regulation and reputation frames refer to the external relations with another nation such as trade agreements and outcomes. (14) Other frames include any frames that do not fit into the above categories.

**Success Factors of an Online Movement/Campaign**

Social media have made it easier to spread information. However, this does not provide any assurance that an issue would travel far or catch much attention. One key element which can determine the success of an online movement or campaign is the way of framing. Researchers have concluded a number of Internet activism campaign's key characteristics: (1) organizers or parties should use at least one media tool; (2) it is an organized social effort that seeks to involve citizens in the campaign as participants; (3) it is collective, which means, its goals should be determined by a group of citizens and implemented in their interests; (4) it has clear requirements that would enable it to deter-mine whether the campaign is successful or unsuccessful; (5) it is targeted; (6) it is a public one, so, a group of initiators should not be representatives of the government or a private company (Edward & Joyce, 2013).

Lim (2013) used case study strategy to investigate key elements which ensure the successful convergence of popular participatory culture and civic engagement. She thought that only simple or simplified narratives can usually go viral. To be more specific, the content should be consumed without spending too much time and can be understood without deep reflection. Additionally, the content should tap into headline appetites and usually embraces a trailer vision. Second, icons and symbolic representations that are compelling and resonate within multiple social clusters can help to catch the attention of publics. Third, narratives that are associated with low risk activism and are congruent with ideological meta-narratives like nationalism have a higher chance to go viral. Success is less likely when narratives are contested by dominant competing narratives generated in mainstream media.

Sokolov, Olenitskaya and Golovin (2018) analyzed the factors that contribute to an organization's successful campaign in social networks. They argued that the success of a campaign conducted with the help of modern technologies largely depends on three main

factors: environmental factors, content factors and organizational factors. Environmental factors include the level of social networks penetration, the degree of media technology development, the state of the political conjuncture, the level of mass media development, the state of the political culture of society and the public request to solve a specific problem. Content factors consist of virality of information and visuality. Organizational factors include speakers' authority, cohesion of the organizers group and the organization of their actions, and availability of the necessary resources for the campaign.

This study will focus on the content itself. According to Sokolov, Olenitskaya and Golovin (2018), virality is one of the key factors that determine the information dissemination and, as a consequence, the success of a campaign. Other researchers have examined the relationship between various emotions and virality. According to Tellis et al. (2019), virality is defined as achieving a large number of views in a short time period due to sharing. One reason certain content may be highly shared is because it has inherent value or contains useful information. Emotional aspects of content may also impact whether it is shared. In the field of marketing, prior integrative models of advertising have proposed two routes by which advertising can influence consumers: an informational route and an emotional route (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). To further investigate the role of emotion in advertising virality, researchers defined information-focused content as a narrator or a voice-over delivering arguments or factual descriptions about products, attributes, people, behaviors, and events. Emotion-focused content was defined as emotions evoked by ads (Tellis et al, 2019). Within communication study, researchers have used emotional content to study sharing or sharing intentions of news articles (Berger & Milkman, 2010; Berger & Milkman, 2013). For instance, Izmestieva (2015) analyzed Google+ user posts and found out that the probability of repost is higher if the information causes anger, while the "sadness" emotion reduces it.

Visuality is another factor that contributes to the information distribution on social media platforms because users are most actively sharing content with visualization elements (Sokolov, Olenitskaya & Golovin, 2018). They did an analysis of messages from numerous communities of Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook, and found that images were shared more than video materials. Their explanation was that understanding and assessing photo information can be much faster than video .

**Political Participation**

Political participation should be analyzed in consideration of cultural backgrounds. In Western countries, political participation refers to legal activities by normal citizens who aim at influencing the selection of governmental personnel or the actions they take (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1979). Other political activities include voting for candidates and making donations to political campaigns (Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

However, political participation in China has long been associated with apathy, alienation and inefficiency due to the restrictions imposed by the government and the lack of access to communication channels to express oneself (Guo, 2007). With the emergence of online communication tools like website, blogging and social media, Chinese citizens were provided with more opportunities to engage in politics. Considering these changes, Chen (2017) defined political participation as "online voluntary activity about a particular political issue which includes – but is not limited to – reading posts, forwarding information, discussing political issues, expressing personal opinions, attending political campaigning activities, subscribing to a political listserv, and sending political messages."

In a previous study, political participation through Weibo was operationalized as online behaviors involving: (1) the reposting of news and information concerning political issues, (2) leaving comments, and (3) the liking of posts (Wang & Shi, 2018). Other researchers have pointed out that "likes", "comments" and "shares" used in social media are

manifestations of behavioral engagement or participation by users (Bonsón et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017). Based on this, other researchers developed a metric called "engagement rate" to measure the performance of a piece of content on a social media platform. Engagement rates are now commonly used by social media marketers to define the success of a campaign. It is calculated using the total figure of interactions on a post, divided by the number of followers of the account. Interactions will vary depending on the platform, for example on Instagram this will include: likes, comments and saves. On Weibo this will include: reposts, comments and likes (Rahman et al., 2016).

The standard for a good engagement rate may also vary depending on the platform. For Facebook, an engagement rate of above 1% is good, 0.5% to 0.99% is average, and anything below 0.5% needs improvement (ThriveHive, 2018). While for Twitter, an engagement rate of above 0.33% is considered to be very high, 0.09% to 0.33% is high, 0.02% to 0.09% is good and anything below 0.02% is considered to be low (Mee, n.d.).

**Framing and Content Analysis Research**

Framing analysis can be divided into three main categories: (1) frame building, (2) frame description and comparison, and (3) frame effects. Frame building refers to what factors influence how news is framed, such as editorial policies, news values, and influence of external factors, such as public relations campaigns. Content analysis is seldom used in frame building research while it is more common in the second category. Researchers use content analysis to identify and describe how news media frame general or specific issues. In addition, frames can be compared across media to determine whether, for instance, print media frame an issue differently from social media (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p.162).

To illustrate, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) examined how the news media framed European politics and whether the use of framed varied significantly by media outlet or by topic. In their study, the results showed that the attribution of responsibility frame was most

commonly used in the news, followed by the conflict, economic consequences, human interest, and morality frames. The use of news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic.

Framing effect research uses content analysis to define news frames and then conducts audience research to see whether the media frames had an effect on audience perception (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p.163). To illustrate, Han, Chock, and Shoemaker (2009) found that news frames affected both U.S. and Chinese audiences' perception of the 2004 election in Taiwan.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Most previous studies looked at online collective action in Western countries, online activism such as political participation has scarcely been reported. This paper focuses on the framing of Chinese state-owned media outlets on Weibo about the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests. The first overall research question is: How did the Chinese government use its state-owned media to frame the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations on Weibo?

Within the framing theory, this research mainly focuses on the framing process and the frame's salience. The following two research questions are asked:

RQ1a: What is the framing process of the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations?

RQ1b: Which specific policy frames can be identified for Weibo posts concerning the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations?

As previously discussed, not every issue will receive widespread attention. What should be done to ensure the success of online activism and mobilization and the convergence of political participation? This study aimed to determine whether the previously mentioned characteristics were featured in the posts about the Hong Kong extradition bill demonstrations. Thus, the following research question is posted.

RQ2: What are the characteristics of Weibo posts that the Chinese state-owned media have published concerning the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations?

In addition to the characteristics of these Weibo posts, this research investigates the characteristics of the posts with high political participation. Thus, the following research question is addressed in the study.

RQ3: What are the characteristics of Weibo posts with a high engagement rate?

This study will examine posts of Chinese state-owned media on Weibo and people's responses to those posts to explore the answers to these research questions. Research

questions are answered using analytics, descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis.

The proposed methods are discussed in detail in the following section.

# CHAPTER 4: METHOD

The study draws on a qualitative content analysis method, in addition to analytics and descriptive statistics, to apply framing theory to the dataset of Weibo posts. Content analysis can be broadly conceptualized as an approach to aggregate inferences about the content of a set of visual or textual data (Carney, 1972). Qualitative content analysis goes beyond word counting to interpreting the content of text data though systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study uses a qualitative analysis method rather than a quantitative one because the former allows for discovering emergent patterns and categories. During the qualitative analysis process, "categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p.26).

Berg (2007) provides a functional, systematic approach for using qualitative content analysis that was applied for this study. Berg suggests including some quantitative data in the analysis as a supplement to the qualitative data. The use of quantitative data along with a qualitative content analysis was also utilized by Roberts and Pettigrew (2007) in their study on food advertising for children. They noted that this allowed for a "descriptive statistics of incidence and a thematic analysis of messages" (p. 358). Therefore, this study includes some quantitative data used to illustrate frequencies, magnitudes and impact in the data.

Qualitative content analysis is used to analyze Weibo posts about the Hong Kong protests from July 2019 to November 2019, when news and discussions about the protests were dominating the trending online streams. Key concepts or variables are identified as initial coding categories based on existing theory including Snow and Benford's (1988) framing process model and the Policy Frames Codebook.

Quantitative data, such as analytics and descriptive statistics, are only included when the quantitative data assists in the analysis and answering of the research questions. For

example, the length of each post and its headline or frequencies in which specific people and events are mentioned can assist with examining the characteristics and impacts of different frames.

**Sampling**

Three representative Chinese state-owned media outlets were selected for this study: *People's Daily* (人民日报), *CCTV* (央视新闻), and *Global Times* (环球时报). All of these media outlets are verified and recognized as genuine news organizations on the Weibo Verified list. To limit the coding content, this study used July 1, 2019 to November 31, 2019 as the time period to analyze posts in coverage of the Hong Kong protests. When searching "Hong Kong" in Baidu Trends, a statistic tool that displays news coverage trends, the results show that coverage of the issue increased rapidly from July to November 2019.

*Figure 1: Hong Kong Search Trend on Baidu Trends*
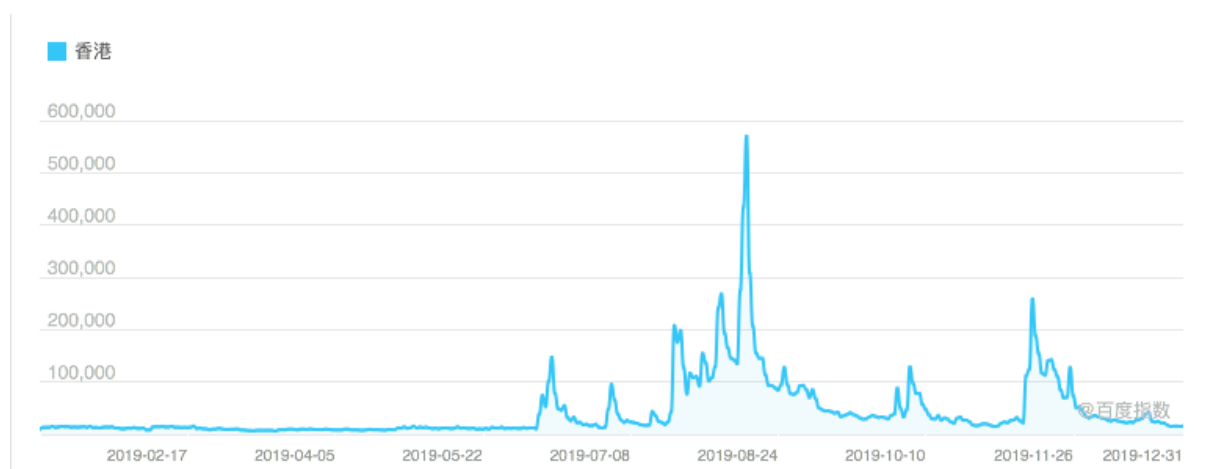


Weibo allows researchers to retrieve messages posted during a specific period through keyword searching. This study uses a data scraping tool to collect and analyze Weibo posts regarding the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations by mining the keyword "Hong Kong". Posts unrelated to the protests are excluded. Since the large number of posts may prevent close analysis of each individual post, a systematic random sample was taken where every 5$^{th}$ post was chosen beginning at a random starting point. A total number of 502 Weibo posts

were qualitatively coded. A sample size of around 500 was decided upon based on feasibility due to availability resources and time constraints.

Considering the similarities between Weibo and Twitter, Weibo posts with high engagement rates were defined as posts with an engagement rate of above 0.09%. A subsample of 78 Weibo posts with high engagement were collected.

**Coding Scheme**

The qualitative content analysis examined from the following aspects: theme of the post, framing category of the post, and characteristics of the post (see Appendix A for protocol). Each post was coded for its date of publication, and which predominant framing process it fell under. The three framing processes refer to diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Snow and Benford, 1988). Diagnostic framing is the first process, in which the problem is identified, and the cause of the problem is determined. Prognostic framing proposes a path which is chosen to solve the problem. Motivational framing is the call to action: what should one do after agreeing with the cause of the problem and believing in the treatment recommendation. For framing processes, each post was coded for the predominant theme. In this study, the coding process began by classifying the unit of analysis, or basic unit of text, as a code that expressed an idea or individual theme in the post. As the researcher read through the texts carefully, strings of words that carried a theme were identified, regardless of their length. The researcher identified the prevailing theme of each post according to the frequencies of words related to each framing process. For example, if two words were related to diagnostic framing and three words were relevant to prognostic framing in the post, then this post would be categorized as prognostic framing.

Then each post was coded for which framing category(ies) it fell under. The posts were classified into one or more of the 14 framing categories established in the Policy Frames Codebook (Boydstun et al., 2013). Researchers have found that "single passages often

contain a number of different ideas each of which needs to be referenced" (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, p.182). For the Weibo posts collected in this study, one code was not enough. This was caused by the compound nature of many posts, e.g., some posts are two separate paragraphs having a different frame or posts began with one frame and end with another. After word-by-word readings of each post, some units of text were assigned to more than one framing categories. The connections of each individual framing category were examined with the help of MAXQDA.

Finally, each post was coded for what characteristics it featured. The characteristics that the research looked for were five elements that have been shown to contribute to the success of an online movement, which include simplification of the narrative, icons and symbolic representation, low-risk mobilization, virality, and visuality (Lim, 2013; Sokolov, Olenitskaya & Golovin, 2018). Simplification of the narrative was coded by the length of the post and its headline. The length of a Weibo post refers to the number of characters and letters contained in the post. Weibo used to impose a post limit of 140 characters like Twitter. Now it has extended the word limit to 2000 characters for each post, but Weibo users have generally maintained the habit of publishing within the original limit (Che & Ip, 2017, p.89). The evaluation of headlines was based on Lim's definition of headline appetite, which refers to a condition where important information is condensed to accommodate a short attention span (Lim, 2013). Therefore, the headline appetite was examined for whether the headline contained all necessary information for the post. Icons and symbolic representations are defined as non-ideological and compelling figures that can resonate within multiple social clusters (Lim, 2013). Low-risk mobilization, based on the concept of low-risk activism refers to accessible and affordable action, such as clicking and sharing, which can be translated into collective movements (Lim, 2013). Virality is related to the presence of a strong emotional component in the information (Sokolov, Olenitskaya & Golovin, 2018). This study focuses

on understanding what types of content people encounter, not what they transmit. Therefore, the study emphasizes emotions depicted in the content rather than those transmitted by people. Theorists believe that humans have a small set of basic emotions and various researchers have attempted to identify those basic emotions which are universal and distinct from each other (Plutchnik, 1984; Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). There is no consensus among researchers on which emotions should be included in the basic set. Considering the language of Weibo posts, this study employed the Chinese Emotion Word Ontology as guidance, which is based on Ekman's (1992) theory of six basic emotions. And one more emotion "love" was added to make it more comfortable for Chinese language analysis. With love added, the seven basic emotion types were love, disgust, joy, anger, sadness, fear, and surprise (Abbasi & Chen, 2008). Visuality codes for visualization elements included pictures and videos.

During the coding process, the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was used to assist with data coding and storage. The dataset was imported in an excel form and different codes were assigned to the segments of texts based on their content.

**Online Political Participation Measurement**

This research builds on attributes developed originally by Bonsón and Ratkai (2013), which have been employed to measure stakeholders' engagement on Facebook sites. Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) suggested that "likes", "shares," and "comments" are indicators of three specific dimensions of participation in social media, namely: popularity, commitment, and virality respectively. Numbers of likes, comments, and reposts for each post were collected during the content analysis. One of the advantages of this method is that the data of "likes", "comments," and "reposts" are available in the public domain and can be considered as intrinsically objective as they are based on user behavior rather than subjective opinions. Engagement rate was calculated by taking the total engagement (likes, comments, and

reposts) received, divided by the number of followers at the time when the post was collected.

**Content Analysis Tool**

Various kinds of qualitative data analysis software have been used to aid content analysis because software can a) speed up the process; b) enhance the rigor; c) provide more flexible data analysis from different perspectives; d) facilitate the exchange and reproduction of data; and e) allow the researcher to reflect in greater depth by reducing the operational activities (Oliveira et al., 2013).

The MAXQDA software packages was used to assist with the process of coding and data analysis, while the researcher manually coded all data qualitatively. Its basic interface consists of four windows: one that provides the data from each project, the texts and groups of texts (document system); one that provides the structure of the codes and categories (code system); one for editing and consulting texts (document browser), and another for conducting searches and checks regarding coded material (retrieved segments). The Weibo dataset was imported into MAXQDA in an Excel format and all the collected posts were displayed in the document browser. First, the names of different codes like diagnostic framing and economic frames were created in the code system. The codes were presented in a hierarchical and tree-like structure. Under the codes of the framing process, diagnostic, prognostic, motivational framing and others were created. Under the codes of the framing categories, the 14 policy frames were created. Under the codes of characteristics, simplification, icons and symbolic representations, low-risk mobilization, virality, and visuality were created. Then, the researcher carefully examined each Weibo post, reading through word-by-word readings and assigning one or more codes to each post segment based on its content. Additionally, as this was a qualitative analysis, posts were also coded via open coding to look for emergent themes and frames not occurring in existing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The Code Relations Browser was used to investigate the relations and connections of the created codes. In the Code Relations Browser, a table shows how the strength of association between two variables through a visual representation of the number of times the code appeared together in the same post. Larger squares indicate a stronger association between codes. In this study, two tables were generated with the Code Relations Browser to show the associations of framing categories and connections of emotions depicted in the posts (see Figures 3 & 6).

# CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

The following sections cover the results of the three research questions. Research question one investigates how Chinese state-owned media framed the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations in regard to framing process and framing categories. Research question two looks at the characteristics of Weibo posts that Chinese state-owned media published concerning the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations. And research question three takes a closer look at those posts with a high engagement rate (above 0.09%).

## Research Question 1a

In terms of the framing process of the Hong Kong extradition bill protests, 142 Weibo posts were categorized as diagnostic framing, 94 posts as prognostic framing, 185 posts as motivational framing and 80 posts did not fit into any of the above categories.

Based on literature review, diagnostic framing involves identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or responsibility. In this 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstration dispute, the 142 diagnostic posts could be divided into two types: internal and external factors which led to the problems. For internal factors, the Chinese government blamed the radicals or rioters for disrupting Hong Kong, contending that those violent radicals aimed to trample the rule of law, sabotage social order, and undermine national sovereignty and the "one country, two systems" principle. For instance, *People's Daily* posted: "The rioters wantonly infringed upon national dignity, undermined 'one country, two systems,' and undermined social peace and the rule of law in Hong Kong." For external factors, the central government laid the blame on foreign governments especially the U.S, contending that those foreign forces were responsible for bolstering violent criminals and creating chaos in Hong Kong. For instance, as a response to the United States signing into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, *People's Daily* posted: "The fundamental purpose of the U.S. side is to destroy Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, undermine the great practice of

'one country, two systems,' and barricade the historical process of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The bill required the U.S. government to impose sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses in the territory, which aimed to support protesters in Hong Kong. According to *People's Daily*, "The intention of the U.S. side is very vicious by bolstering violent criminals who smashed facilities, attacked innocent resident and trampled on the rule of law and social order."

The purpose of prognostic framing is not only to suggest solutions to the problem but also to identify strategies, tactics, and targets. In most cases, there was a direct correspondence between diagnostic and prognostic framing efforts. To illustrate, after a mass sit-in at the Hong Kong International Airport, cancelling hundreds of flights and descending into clashes with police, the Airport Authority submitted an application to the High Court. The Airport Authority requested to prohibit any person from unlawfully and willfully obstructing and interfering with operations at the airport. Some posts specifically identified what the Chinese government needs to do, while others proposed what the external forces should do. For example, Hong Kong Justice Secretary Teresa Cheng was attacked by protesters in London. *People's Daily* responded by quoting Foreign Ministry spokesperson "We demand that the UK immediately launch a thorough investigation into this incident, spare no effort to apprehend the culprits and bring them to justice, and ensure the safety and dignity of all Chinese in the UK." In general, the Chinese government took the responsibility for solving the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests, putting a huge burden on the city's police force, existing policies, new orders, and diplomacy.

Agreement about causes and solutions to a particular problem does not necessarily lead to corrective action, so motivational framing involves the elaboration of a call to action or rationale for action that goes beyond the diagnosis and prognosis. Of the 185 posts, most appealed to mainland netizens and they called on people to stand on the side of the central

government. For example, considering the geographical distance between mainland China and Hong Kong, those posts called on people to show support for Hong Kong police by reposting. For example, these posts usually started with "Let's repost," "Repost if you support them" and "Are you willing to repost for them." And only a few posts targeted people in Hong Kong, calling on Hong Kong citizens to think rationally and say no to violence. For instance, *Global Times* called on Hong Kong citizens to "speak out and say 'no' to violence, and to stay away from the violence."

Although the remaining 80 posts did not fit in the three framing themes above, they all had one thing in common – highlighting the results or achievements of the proposed solutions. Continuing with the example of Hong Kong International Airport, *People's Daily* posted that "Hong Kong airport resumed normal operations" after the interim injunction banning unlawful obstruction of airport operations was issued. The results most commonly shown in the posts were about the number of protesters arrested by Hong Kong police. For example, *People's Daily* posted in August: "Hong Kong police have arrested 420 people since June. 9."

The framing process of the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations did not necessarily follow Snow and Benford's (1988) model. The following chart (Figure 2) shows the timeline of Weibo posts by *People's Daily*, categorized by framing themes. The horizontal axis refers to the date of each post. The colors of vertical lines indicate which framing theme the post belongs to. As is shown in Figure 2 (see below), the four framing themes are distributed mostly evenly throughout, from the early stage to the end stage of the dispute. Prognostic framing did not necessarily come after diagnostic framing or come before motivational framing. In some instances, attention was focused so singularly on diagnosing problems that the prognostic considerations were neglected. Therefore, focus on the problem and its causes may be more widespread. For instance, *Global Times* posted how Hong Kong's economy

especially tourism, retail, and hotel industries were affected by the protests. The post used Hong Kong Disneyland as an example, saying that "violent protesters were responsible for the decline of visitors". Although questions of what should be done and why might have left unanswered, the consequences of violent demonstrations and the attribution of responsibility were greatly emphasized.

*Figure 2: Timeline of Framing Themes (full sample)*
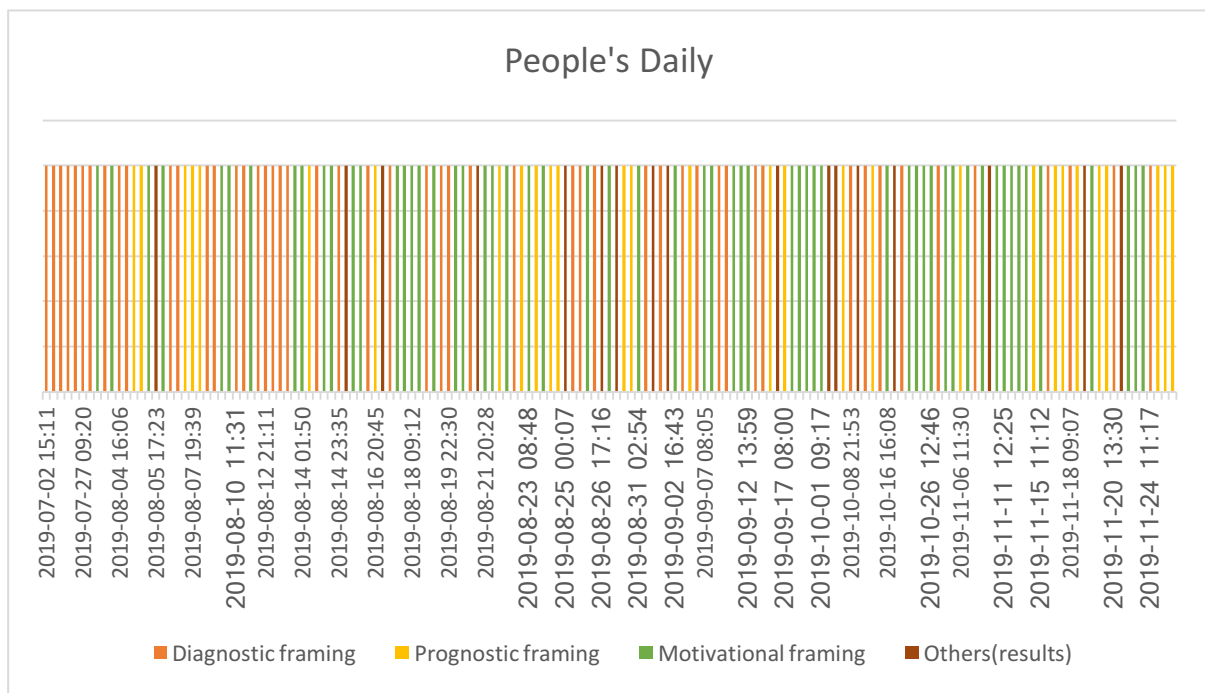


If the timeline was divided into shorter periods of time, then certain events did follow the pattern of Snow and Benford's (1988) framing model. The framing process begins with diagnostic framing, followed by prognostic and motivational framing and ending with results. For example, on August 22, People's *Daily* criticized protesters for wearing masks because masks helped hide their identities when they defied police bans to join protests, trash subway stations, or engage in physical clashes with officers. Six days later, anti-mask laws were proposed by Hong Kong non-governmental organizations. Almost at the same time, *People's Daily* called on young people in Hong Kong to "take off the mask and be an upright man". On Oct. 4, the Hong Kong government announced a ban on face masks at public gatherings.

Four days later, *Global Times* posted that "77 people had been arrested for violating the anti-mask law".

**Research Question 1b**

In terms of framing categories, some posts contained two or more policy frames. The total number of each policy frame can be found in Table 1. Overall, some policy frames were more frequently used than others. As is shown in Table 1, the law and order, crime and justice frame occurred most frequently, followed by the morality, cultural identity, security and defense, and quality of life frames, and external regulation and reputation frame respectively. The health and safety and public opinion frames were rarely featured in Weibo posts about the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations.

*Table 1: Number of Each Framing Category (full sample)*

| | Economy | Morality | Constitutionality & jurisprudence | Policy prescription & evaluation | Law & order, crime & justice | Security & defense | Health & safety | Quality of life | Cultural identity | Public opinion | External regulation & reputation | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 16 | 95 | 23 | 41 | 123 | 69 | 3 | 52 | 86 | 4 | 45 | 17 |
| Percentage | 3% | 19% | 5% | 8% | 25% | 14% | 1% | 10% | 17% | 1% | 9% | 3% |

*Law and order, crime and justice frame.* The results of the content analysis showed that the three state-owned media entities used this frame most frequently (see Table 1). Overall, this frame included existing laws in practice and new laws proposed for addressing identified problems and their enforcement, incentives, and implications. Regarding the new anti-mask law, Chinese media explained the legality of implementing such a new law by introducing the history of foreign government efforts to stop people from wearing masks. For example, *People's Daily* introduced anti-mask laws in Canada, which "cover those who commit offences while wearing any disguise and is punishable by up to 10 years in prison." Besides that, the state-owned media posted stories about protesters' breaking existing laws, sentencing and punishment. For instance, the central government strongly condemned flag-insulting acts by radicals. By quoting a central government spokesperson, *People's Daily*

posted that "the acts have seriously violated the National Flag Law of the People's Republic of China and the National Flag and National Emblem Ordinance of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region." How those radicals were punished was most frequently used by the media. For example, *Global Times* quoted the Hong Kong police as saying that "people were arrested for a range of offenses including rioting, unlawful assembly, assaulting police officers and possessing offensive weapons".

*Morality frame.* This frame was also frequently used by Chinese state-owned media. The morality frame puts the events, problems or issues in the context of moral prescriptions. Specifically, this frame involves action related to duty, honor, righteousness, or any other issues of ethics or social responsibility. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest dispute, the morality frame was used to praise people who stuck to a moral path, but also to criticize those who behaved unethically. For instance, the Hong Kong police were praised for remaining committed to their jobs despite violent attacks and great pressure. In the meantime, the central government accused the U.S. of applying a "double standard" and "mixing right and wrong, black and white." The posts identified the U.S.' interference as "whitewashing the illegal and criminal acts of Hong Kong violent elements for political purpose", which, according to the posts, "seriously violated basic moral standards".

*Cultural identity frame.* This frame was often used by Chinese state-owned media, but less frequently than the morality frame. The cultural identity frame refers to social norms, trends, values, and customs, which can evoke the feeling of belonging to a group. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest issue, the cultural identity was closely connected to nationality, especially a sense of pride in being a Chinese. Continuing with the flag-insulting example employed above, *CCTV* posted a story showing that Hong Kong residents gathered at the pier of the Victoria Harbor to express their reverence to the Chinese national emblem and flag. The story also included quotes from the participants, such as, "A national flag represents the

dignity of a country. These insulting acts drew an outpouring of anger from all Chinese."

Other stories like Hong Kong citizens singing the Chinese national anthem in a flash mob were also commonly seen in the Weibo posts.

*Security and defense frame.* Chinese state-owned media utilized this frame less often than the cultural identity frame. The security and defense frame involved threats to security, and protection of a person, family, group, or nation. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstration issue, Chinese media blamed violent radicals for posing threat to the Hong Kong police and residents. In some posts, Chinese state-owned media generally condemned protesters destroying Hong Kong's stability and causing security threats. In other posts, the media depicted specifically why "protesters had pushed Hong Kong to the verge of a very dangerous situation". For instance, a Weibo post described the scene where an old man was surrounded by demonstrators because he did not receive their leaflets. According to the post, "The protesters shouted, crashed, and irradiated the old man with a laser pen. Some crashed into the old man". Another Weibo post showed that protesters trashed or firebombed stores and attacked police officers. And an officer's finger was cut off by a protester.

*Quality of life frame.* This frame involves the effects of an event or issue on individual's daily life and ease of day-to-day routines. The quality of life frame was often used with the security and defense frame (see Figure 3). Chinese state media tended to report threats to security and influence of protests on daily life together. Continuing with the illustrations employed above, the same post also showed that protesters occupied the road and set up roadblocks to block traffic, which seriously affected the operations of public services such as buses and trams. The disruption of public services like public transport was most frequently mentioned in this frame. A video showed that Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway (MTR) services were suspended as protesters gathered at the station to put up flyers

and held up a train by blocking train doors. The media laid the blame on protesters, contending that "their actions caused inconvenience to Hong Kong residents".

*Figure 3: Associations of framing categories (full sample)*
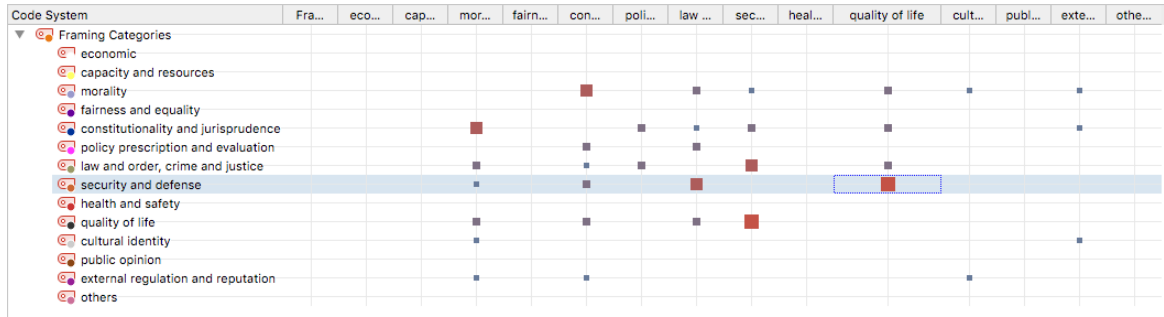


*External regulation and reputation frame.* This frame refers to China's external relations with other nations. In this study, Chinese state media employed the external regulation and reputation frame only when foreign governments were involved in the issue. The most frequently mentioned foreign country was the U.S. Instead of specific agreements between two countries, most posts served as diplomatic statements by quoting the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson. Additionally, most posts expressed strong disapproval or condemnation against interference from foreign governments in Hong Kong affairs. For example, after the passage of the Hong Kong bill by the U.S. Senate, Chinese state media strongly condemned U.S. meddling in China's internal affairs and reiterated the Foreign Ministry's statement, demanding that "the U.S. should remove its 'black hand' from Hong Kong's protests".

*Policy prescription and evaluation frame.* This frame was occasionally used by Chinese state media. The policy prescription and evaluation frame included proposed policies proposed for addressing an identified problem and existing policies. The existing policy that was most frequently mentioned was the "one country, two systems" principle, which allows Hong Kong and Macau to retain their own economic and administrative systems. Chinese state media insisted that "the 'one country, two systems' principle should be upheld in Hong Kong as it has been working effectively, ensuring Hong Kong enjoys freedoms unavailable in

mainland China". Like the law and order frame, the policy prescription and evaluation frame also proposed new methods to settle the dispute of violence demonstrations. Different from laws, the proposed policy was more like a statement or a slogan of what the central government intended to do. To illustrate, most posts emphasized that "the most urgent task for Hong Kong was to bring the violence and chaos to an end and restore order", quoting Chinese President Xi Jinping. Chinese state media also posted that some companies like the Big Four accounting firms expressed opposition against violence and illegal acts in Hong Kong and support for the "one country, two systems" principle and the proposed new policy as well.

*Constitutionality and jurisprudence frame.* Chinese state media seldom employed this frame when posting news on Weibo. The constitutionality and jurisprudence frame involved constraints imposed on or freedom granted to individuals, corporations, and government. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest dispute, this frame dealt specifically with the authority of Hong Kong government to regulate independently of mainland China. Chinese state media insisted that "under the 'one country, two systems' principle, the central government had guaranteed Hong Kong freedom and democracy". Besides that, Chinese media condemned U.S. "destroying prosperity and stability and containing China's development in the name of freedom and human rights".

*Economic frame.* This frame was seldom used in Weibo posts about the Hong Kong extradition bill demonstrations. The economic frame reported an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it would have economically on an individual, group, or country. The results of the content analysis showed that 16 posts mentioned financial losses caused by violent protests. To illustrate the economic impact, Chinese media tended to use figures. For instance, *Global Times* posted that "in the third quarter, Hong Kong's GDP shrank 3.2% from

the previous quarter, which had seen a drop of 0.4%". Pictures depicting empty lines and sparsely populated streets were posted by *CCTV*.

*Public opinion frame*. This frame hardly seemed to play a role in Weibo posts about the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests. The public opinion frame involved reference to general social attitudes, polling, and demographic information. The general social attitude shown in the posts was that "there were only a handful of separatists in Hong Kong and that most residents denounced violence".

*Health and safety frame*. This frame was hardly utilized by Chinese state media. The health and safety frame included healthcare access and effectiveness, illness, and disease. In this study, the three posts were all about the health situation of Uncle Li, who was burned by Hong Kong rioters. The media reported that "Li had finished his second skin graft, and was gradually recovering".

*Others*. These 17 Weibo posts did not fit in any of the framing categories above. Instead of news reporting or editorials, these posts functioned as slogans. More importantly, these posts expressed sympathy or solidarity with others. For instance, these posts included messages like, "We worry about Hong Kong," "It's distressing to see what's happening in Hong Kong," "Hong Kong is China's Hong Kong, we won't let it 'sink'," and "Support Hong Kong police."

**Research Question 2**

When analyzing the characteristics of Weibo posts about the Hong Kong extradition bill demonstrations, the following findings were revealed.

The first characteristic present was simplification of the post. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of post length and title length. On average, the 502 Weibo posts consisted of 162 Chinese characters. The average length of the post title was 17.5 Chinese characters.

*Table 2: Descriptive statistics of post length and title length (sample)*

|  | Length (post) | Length (title) |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | 162 | 17.5 |

Figures 4 and 5 show the counts of individual post length and title length. The horizontal axis refers to the unique values of post length and title length, and the vertical axis refers to the count of each unique value. As is shown in Figure 4, most Weibo posts contained 50 – 150 Chinese characters, and only a few contained more than 300 Chinese characters. Thirteen Weibo posts consisted of 119 Chinese characters. In terms of title length (see Figure 5), a total of 38 Weibo posts did not include a title, which took up about 5.5% of the sample. Thirty-four Weibo post titles consisted of 17 Chinese characters.

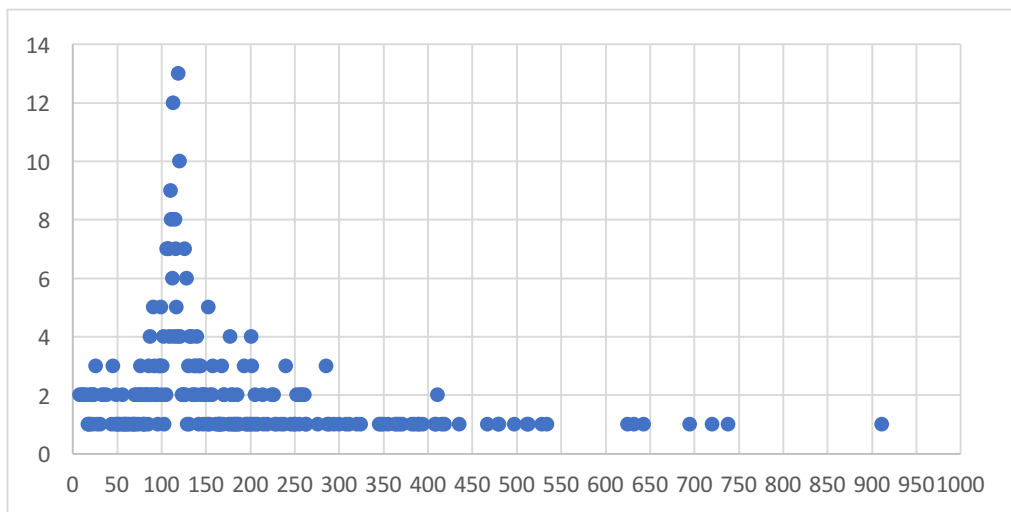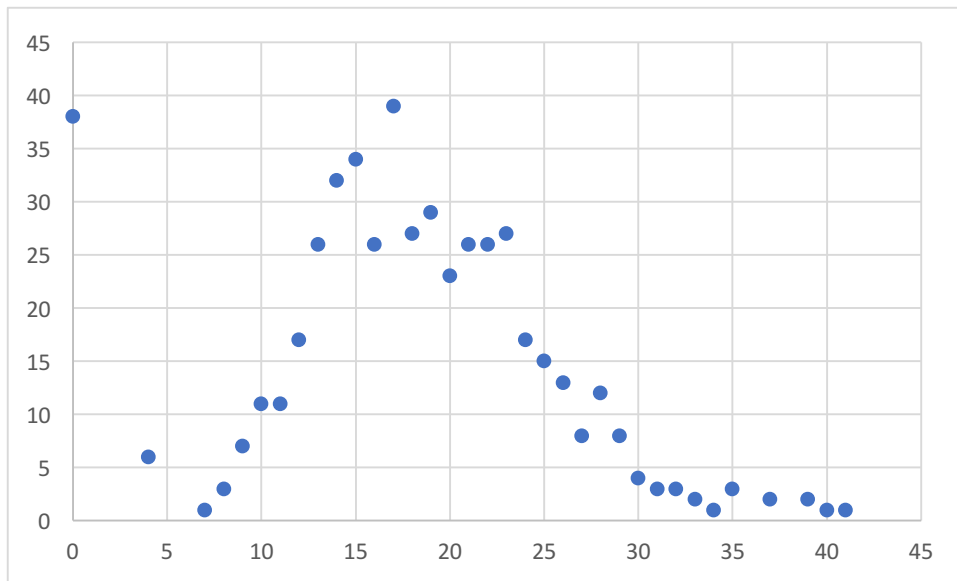*Figure 4: Count of post length (full sample)*

*Figure 5: Count of title length (full sample)*



In terms of the content of each title (see Table 3), 256 titles were similar to traditional news headlines, which provided an overview of the news or story. For instance, one of the post titles was "Huang Zhifeng, the leader of Chaotic Port, was arrested." The post itself was a piece of news, explaining when, where and why this person was arrested. One hundred and sixty-one titles emphasized only certain aspects of the news or story. These post titles can be further divided into two categories: direct headlines and quotations. Sixty-two headlines went straight to the heart of the matter. For example, one of the post titles was "Prohibit masks and stop violence." The post itself was an editorial and was about why it was necessary to implement anti-mask laws and what are the benefits of doing so, and the post title was the conclusion of the editorial. Ninety-nine posts used single quotes in headlines, especially the quotes from political leaders of the government. Twenty-seven headlines were motivational, which called on people to show their support by reposting. Fourteen headlines served as introduction, which helped direct attention and introduced the following content. For instance, one of the titles was: "An elementary school student in Hong Kong has something to say to the rioters." The post was about what the student actually wanted to say to those violent protesters. Six headlines were "Hello, tomorrow," which were unrelated to the post

content. "Hello, tomorrow" is a news review column on the *People' Daily* microblog. *People' Daily* will say "good night" to netizens on Weibo with "Hello, tomorrow" as the title, commenting on the social hot events of the day with clear viewpoints.

*Table 3: Types of headline content (full sample)*

|  | Traditional news headline | Direct headline | Quotation | Motivational headline | Introduction | Unrelated | No headline |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 256 | 62 | 99 | 27 | 14 | 6 | 38 |
| Percantage | 51% | 12% | 20% | 5% | 3% | 1% | 8% |

The second characteristic was icons and symbolic representation. Of all the 502 Weibo posts, about 17.5% (88) had icons or symbolic representation that are non-ideological, compelling, and representative. These 88 posts can be further divided into 5 categories: victims of the violence, ordinary residents in Hong Kong, Hong Kong celebrities, Chinese students who are studying abroad, and foreigners.

Chinese state media tended to depict ordinary residents as victims and violent protesters as perpetrators whose actions purportedly threatened weaker individuals. To illustrate, Chinese media reported that Uncle Luo, a 70-year-old cleaner, died after being hit in the head by a brick thrown by masked rioters. The media also paid much attention to Uncle Li, a 57-year-old construction worker, who was set on fire by violent radicals. After that, the media posted follow-up reports about the recovery situation of Uncle Li. Another finding was that both Uncle Luo's and Uncle Li's relatives were interviewed by the media, and they both expressed hope that their tragedy would bring violence and chaos to an end.

Some ordinary Hong Kong residents who were opposed to violent protests were identified as a "civilian hero" by Chinese state media. For example, *CCTV* posted stories about Li Kaihu, the owner of Hong Kong Tea Café. She was harassed and slandered by demonstrations because she posted a sign supporting Hong Kong police in the restaurant. Despite the "unjustified comments and complaints" posted by protesters, Li responded in the interview that "she was not intimidated and still 200% supported the police". Other narratives

glorified Hong Kong police defending the Motherland. For instance, Chinese state media praised a Hong Kong policeman, nicknamed "bald Lau Sir," for fending off rioters at the front line. Chinese media called on its 1.4 billion people to support him. Lau became an icon for the "Support Hong Kong police campaign" overnight. In late September, 10 Hong Kong police officers including Lau Sir were invited to attend the National Day ceremony in Beijing, and they were prominently portrayed in Weibo posts.

Hong Kong celebrities including actors, singers, and businessmen were also frequently portrayed in Weibo posts. For example, *People's Daily* posted a video of Hong Kong actor Zuo Xiang telling his experience of being discriminated against abroad. At the end of this post, it called on young people in Hong Kong to "always remember the sense of belonging to China."

Additionally, Chinese state media often portrayed overseas students in Weibo posts. The media praised overseas Chinese students who were trying to voice their support for Beijing or shut down demonstrations. Of all the Chinese international students, the media highlighted the story of Ban Yalun, a Chinese young woman studying in Germany. *CCTV* posted a video of her using three languages to refute Hong Kong protesters in Germany. *Global Times* interviewed Ban after the video went viral on Weibo and posted that Ban "was not afraid at all" during the debate.

Foreigners were another group of people frequently mentioned in these Weibo posts. Chinese state media often showed how foreigners like American YouTubers, British businessmen, and German journalists opposed Hong Kong rioters. To illustrate, a short of video of a Greek man condemning the Hong Kong protesters in Australia went viral on Weibo. *CCTV* not only posted this video on its microblog, but also interviewed him. In the interview, the Greek man condemned western media for fake reports relating to Hong Kong protests and urged young demonstrators to stop their violence. He responded: "Western

media always use fake news and are always anti-China. If they don't like something, they will use anything to convince the public that the other side is doing wrong. But if you're intelligent enough, you should search for the truth."

The third characteristic was low-risk mobilization. Nearly 8% (40) of the posts appealed to people to stand on the side of the central government by reposting. Some of the examples were: "I love China! I love Hong Kong! Hong Kong is part of China forever! Repost to let the world know!", "Repost! The five-star red flag has 1.4 billion protectors!" and "Repost to support Lau Sir!".

The fourth characteristic was emotional content of the posts. In general, all the posts can be categorized as informational content or emotional content. Informational content typically involved factual descriptions or arguments. Overall, 46.4% (233) of the posts delivered informational content. Some posts were factual descriptions or factual claims made by a spokesperson. For example, Hong Kong police held a press conference declaring that "1,117 people had been arrested since June". Other posts used logical reasoning. For example, *People's Daily* commented on why it was necessary to implement anti-mask law, saying that "an important reason why the chaos in Hong Kong had continued to this day was that protesters wore masks to hide their identity, openly challenged the law, and used violence to disrupt social peace".

The remaining 269 posts contained one or more emotional components. In terms of positive emotions, love, joy, inspiration, enthusiasm, pride, and trust were identified. In terms of negative emotions, anger, fear, and sadness were identified. Overall, some emotions were more frequently used than others. As is shown in Table 4, anger occurred most frequently, followed by pride, enthusiasm, trust, and joy respectively. Fear was least frequently used by Chinese state media.

*Table 4: Number of posts containing emotions (full sample)*

|  | Love | Joy | Inspiration | Enthusiasm | Pride | Trust | Anger | Fear | Sadness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 23 | 32 | 11 | 40 | 42 | 39 | 107 | 8 | 23 |
| Percantage | 9% | 12% | 4% | 15% | 16% | 14% | 40% | 3% | 9% |

*Anger.* The content analysis revealed that anger was most frequently used by Chinese state media. Anger is a powerful emotion characterized by feelings of hostility, agitation, and antagonism towards others. Some posts employed phrases like "resentful" and "make someone's blood boil" to convey anger. Some posts used pejoratives to express anger. For example, Chinese state media described protesters' actions as "wanton, aggressive, and inhumane". Foreign governments who voiced support for Hong Kong protesters were described as "hypocritical and arrogant". Other posts utilized rhetorical questions to convey anger. In Chinese, a rhetorical question is a statement with a question mask that demonstrates a speaker's real intention or reveals moods like anger. For example, one post wrote: "If violence is allowed pervade Hong Kong, does civilization still exist? Does axiom exist? Does rule of law exist?" The questions were not meant to be answered, but to invoke thought or moral outrage. The real purpose was to condemn the violence in Hong Kong and to powerfully convey anger.

*Pride.* Compared to anger, pride was far less frequently utilized by Chinese state media. Typically, pride is a sense of approval of oneself and pleasure in an achievement or personal attribute. In this study, pride was closely related to patriotism. Quotes from residents often expressed their pride of being a Chinese citizen. Some of the examples were: "Long live China!", "No country, no home!" and "China is my country. You can leave if you don't want to be a Hong Konger."

*Enthusiasm.* Enthusiasm represents a sense of excitement, accompanied by motivation and engagement. Most Weibo posts conveyed enthusiasm by using an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence. This sense of excitement or passion was often related to patriotism. As

is shown in Figure 6, enthusiasm usually occurred with pride. To illustrate, People's Daily posted a video of Hong Kong artists leading the crowd to shout: "My Chinese heart, I am Chinese!" *People's Daily* described this scene in detail, saying that "These people are filled with enthusiasm!"

*Figure 6: Associations of emotions (full sample)*
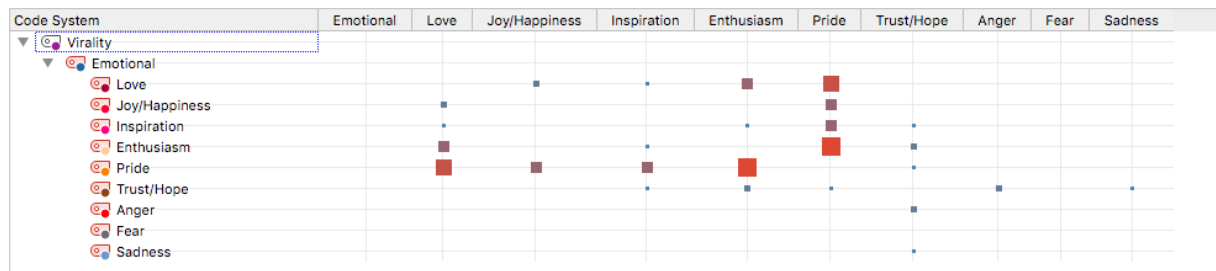


*Trust.* There was no significant difference among the usage frequency of pride, enthusiasm, and trust. Trust can be a set of behaviors, such as acting in ways that depend on another person. Trust can also be feeling of confidence and security. Most posts expressed trust in the central government, believing that rioters would be brought to justice, and that Hong Kong would have a better tomorrow. Some examples were: "The torrent of justice is unstoppable," "The chaotic situation won't be allowed to continue endlessly," and "Hong Kong will definitely wake up from the nightmare and become better."

*Joy.* Joy is a sense of elation and happiness, and is often experienced as a sudden spike due to something good happening. In some posts, the sense of happiness was aroused by acts of kindness. For example, *Global Times* posted about the police officers' happiness when they received 650 boxes of mooncakes sent from supporters in mainland China. While in some posts, how people fought back against the protesters aroused sense of joy. For example, one of the post titles wrote: "Great joy to all people! Angry Hong Kong residents questioned riots ringleader."

*Love.* Love is a feeling of deep and enduring affection for someone and it can be directed towards an individual, a group of people, or even humanity. In this content analysis, love was not expressed towards people, but towards a city and the nation. Therefore, love

usually occurred with pride (see Figure 6). Some examples are: "I love China, I love Hong Kong!" and "Everyone sang 'I and My Motherland' to express their deep love and ardent feelings for the motherland."

*Sadness*. Sadness is a type of emotion often characterized by feelings of disappointment, grief, hopelessness and dampened mood. Phrases like "said with tears in eyes," "choked with sobs," and "felt painful" were frequently used to convey sadness. Some posts expressed sadness towards the innocent victims who were hurt by Hong Kong protesters. For instance, *People's Daily* interviewed residents who came to mourn for Uncle Luo and they "were choking with sobs." Other posts expressed sadness towards the chaotic situation in Hong Kong. For instance, *Global Times* interviewed a Hong Kong resident and quoted his response as saying that "he doesn't know how to say it and that he's really sad about what's going on in Hong Kong".

*Inspiration*. People usually experience inspiration when they feel engaged, uplifted and motivated by something they witnessed. Of these 11 posts, inspiration often came from experiencing a very moving and uplifting experience. Using the example of Lau Sir mentioned above, many Chinese netizens expressed their support for Lau Sir online and made comics to support the Hong Kong police. One post wrote that: "Lau Sir was deeply moved and he said, 'It's like a glass of water to people who are in desert, it's nectar.'"

*Fear*. Chinese state media seldom used this emotion in the posts. Fear is an emotional response to an immediate threat. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstration issue, fear was often evoked by threat to security. For example, Chinese state media framed the demonstrations as terrorism, fearing that "Hong Kong would slide into a bottomless abyss if the terror atrocities were allowed to continue". In another post, *CCTV* used "scary" to describe the scenes of devastation at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which was once occupied by protesters.

The fifth characteristic was visuality. Of all the 502 Weibo posts, 225 include one or more pictures, 186 included a video, 72 included a link to an article, and 19 of them were text-only. Pictures were most frequently employed (see Table 5).

*Table 5: Types of Visualization elements (full sample)*

|  | Picture | Video | Link | None |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 225 | 186 | 72 | 19 |
| Percantage | 45% | 37% | 14% | 4% |

According to the content of each picture, the 225 posts can further be divided into 5 types. Posts regarding diplomatic statements like "China strongly condemns U.S. meddling in its internal affairs," a picture of the spokesperson was often employed. To vividly illustrate the post content, news pictures were utilized to present a story. For instance, scenes of protests were often portrayed in those pictures. The third type was news graphics, which combined data with visual elements. These pictures were most frequently used to illustrate the financial losses caused by the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations. The fourth type was news comics, which always served as posters for campaigns. For instance, in the "Support Hong Kong police campaign," *People's Daily* issued an illustration that shows three police officers carrying weapons and protective screens. Behind them were protesters, and above them was China's five-starred red flag (see Figure 7). Some pictures were irrelevant to the post content. They were used to emphasize whether it was a news flash or the latest news.

## Research Question 3

When analyzing the 78 Weibo posts with high engagement, the following findings were revealed.

The first characteristic was simplification. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of post length and title length for the subsample with high engagement. The shortest post contained only 8 Chinese characters. On average, the 78 Weibo posts consisted of 120 Chinese characters. The longest post title contained 41 Chinese characters, while some posts did not include a title. The average length of the post title was 15.1 Chinese characters.

Table 6: *Descriptive statistics of post length and title length (subsample)*

|  | Length (post) | Length (title) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mean | 120 | 15.1 |

Figures 8 and 9 show the counts of individual post length and title length. The horizontal axis refers to the unique values of post length and title length, and the vertical axis refers to the count of each unique value. As is shown in Figure 8, most posts with high engagement contained 100 – 150 Chinese characters, and only a few contained more than 150

Chinese characters. Three of them were composed of 117 Chinese characters. In terms of title length (see Figure 9), a total of 12 Weibo posts did not include a title, which took up over 15% of the subsample.
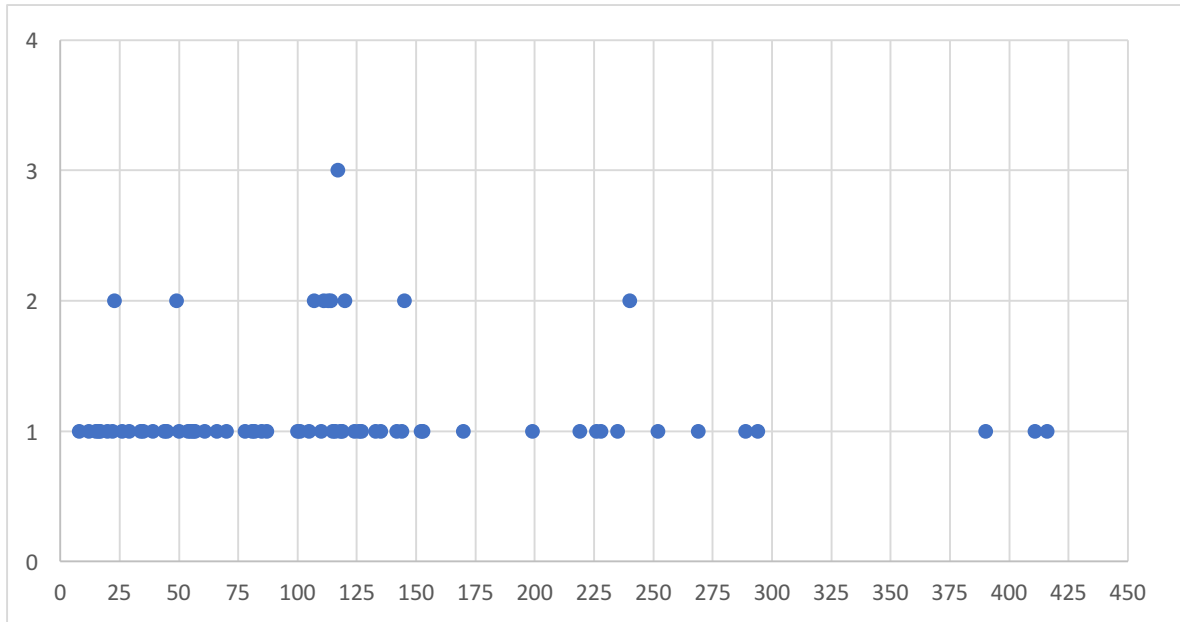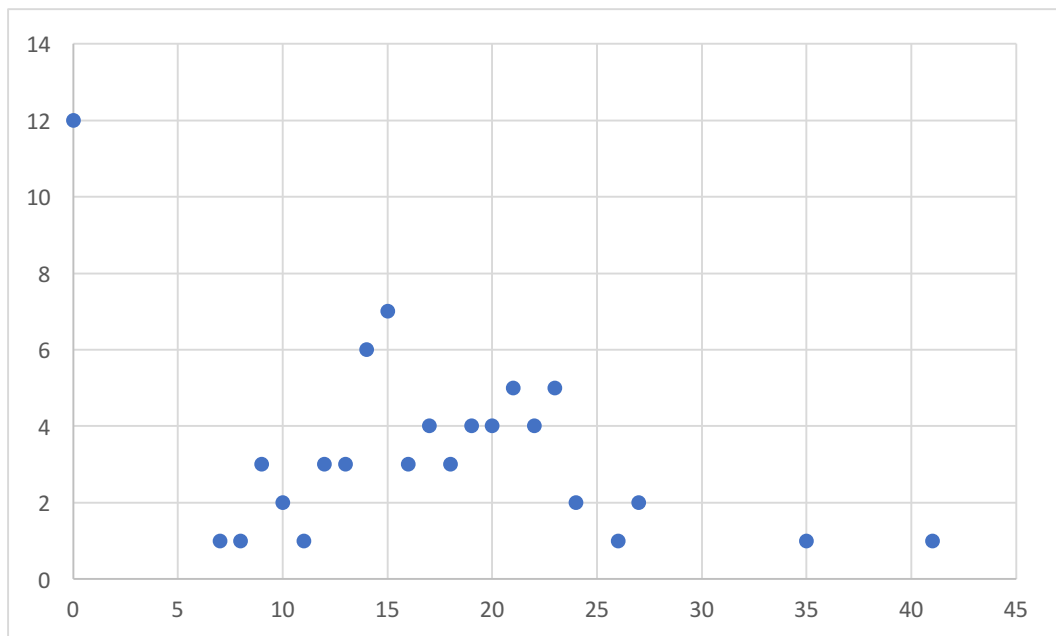
*Figure 8: Count of post length (subsample)*



*Figure 9: Count of title length (subsample)*



In terms of the content of each title (see Table 7), 40 post titles were similar to traditional news headlines, 4 went straight to the heart of the matter, 14 were quotations from

the post, 6 were motivational headlines, and 2 served as introductions to the post content. More than half of the headlines functioned as traditional news headlines which provided an overview of the news or story.

*Table 7: Types of headline content (subsample)*

|  | Traditional news headline | Direct headline | Quotation | Motivational headline | Introduction | Unrelated | No headline |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 40 | 4 | 14 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 12 |
| Percantage | 51% | 5% | 18% | 8% | 3% | 0% | 15% |

The second characteristic was icons and symbolic representation. Of all the 78 Weibo posts, about 37.1% (29) portrayed icons or symbolic representation. Similar to the results mentioned above, these 29 posts depicted how ordinary people were attacked by Hong Kong protesters, how residents expressed opposition towards violence, and how celebrities, overseas students and foreigners showed support for the central government. For example, a *Global Times'* post showing an old man bullied by Hong Kong protesters had an engagement rate of 2.55%.

The third characteristic was low-risk mobilization. Over 12.8% (10) of the posts with high engagement involved easy and low-risk actions. These 10 posts all called on people to show support for the central government or commitment to the nation by reposting. Compared with the full sample posts, low-risk actions were more frequently employed in posts with high engagement.

The fourth characteristic was the emotional contents of the posts. Based on the criteria mentioned above, 35.9% (28) of the posts with high engagement were identified as informational, and 64.1% (50) contained one or more emotional components. Enthusiasm, anger, and pride were most frequently expressed in the posts with high engagement (see Table 8).

*Table 8: Types of emotions (subsample)*

|  | Love | Joy | Inspiration | Enthusiasm | Pride | Trust | Anger | Fear | Sadness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 5 | 8 | 0 | 13 | 11 | 5 | 13 | 1 | 6 |
| Percantage | 10% | 16% | 0% | 26% | 22% | 10% | 26% | 2% | 12% |

The fifth characteristic was visuality. Of all the 78 posts, 39 included a video, 35 included one or more pictures, 3 included a link to an article, and only was text-only. Videos were most frequently used in posts with high engagement (see Table 9).

*Table 9: Types of Visualization elements (subsample)*

|  | Picture | Video | Link | None |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number | 35 | 39 | 3 | 1 |
| Percantage | 45% | 50% | 4% | 1% |

# CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study allowed the researcher to examine how the Chinese state-owned media framed the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations on Weibo. The study also looked at the five characteristics of Weibo posts about the issue. In the following sections, a higher-level look at the logical reasons behind these frames and characteristics is discussed.

**Framing Process**

In terms of the different framing themes, motivational framing occurred most frequently, followed by diagnostic framing and prognostic framing. In addition to these three themes, this study found a new theme which fit into the whole framing process: framing of results.

Typically, motivational framing represents an appeal to the audience to take some desired action. While the results of the content analysis showed that most motivational posts called for attitudinal change rather than behavioral change. First of all, most Weibo users are from mainland China, and they are the target audience of Chinese state media. Considering the geographical distance, Weibo users were unable to stop the violence in Hong Kong by showing up to the scene of protests. Therefore, the Chinese government took a different tact to unite people – motivate netizens to express approval of the government's policies online. To strengthen the impression, Chinese state media usually repeated the appeal and rationale for such an appeal several times.

For diagnostic framing, the responsibility of causing chaos in Hong Kong was often attributed to foreign governments such as the U.S. Although violent rioters in Hong Kong were also blamed for disrupting social order, Chinese state media described them as a minority of people. The media laid much blame on foreign governments, especially the U.S. By doing so, every Chinese national was confronted with a collective external enemy: the Western countries. One study showed that common enemies can serve to unite people. After

9/11, many Americans reported feeling a heightened sense of unity and patriotism. They felt as if they could ignore divisions across party lines and unite against a common enemy (Morgan, Wisneski & Skitka, 2011). This theory could explain why Chinese state-owned media tended to depict foreign powers as common enemies for Chinese citizens.

In the framing of the Hong Kong extradition bill protest dispute, prognostic framing was sometimes neglected because emphasis was put on problem diagnoses. Although questions of what should be done and why may have received little attention, concern and consensus with respect to the nature and the causes of the problem could be widespread. In this case, the cause – foreign countries' interference in China's internal affairs – was widely spread on Weibo. Framing of results does not constitute a necessary part of the framing process, but it could strengthen Chinese people's trust in their nation, especially when prognostic framing was neglected.

Snow and Benford's (1988) framing model could not be applied to the protest dispute as a whole, but certain events during a certain period of time followed the pattern of this model. During the time when protests were going on in Hong Kong, the situation changed with every passing day. As violence increased in the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests, Chinese state media usually reiterated their previous appeals, such as supporting Hong Kong police and identified a new problem. As a consequence, a new solution might be proposed, followed by new motivational appeals.

**Framing Categories**

The content analysis showed that Chinese state media tended to frame the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations from four perspectives. The most common frames were, in order of predominance, law and order, morality, cultural identity, and security and defense.

By using a law and order frame, Chinese state media identified the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations as illegal acts that challenged the authority of the central government in

Beijing. By law, it was legal for the Hong Kong government to suppress demonstrations, which did not violate people's right of free speech. Additionally, by showing the punishment for protesters, the high cost of breaking the law would be deeply rooted in Chinese netizens' mind.

Morality frames were always used when Chinese media expressed strong condemnation against radicals or foreign governments. Backed by moral standards, Chinese state media would automatically stand on the side of righteousness, while the opposite would represent wickedness.

In this study, cultural identity was closely connected to nationality, especially a sense of pride in being a Chinese. By posting how protesters were trying to tear the nations apart and how patriots opposed violence, Chinese state media could arouse people's sense of nationalism, thus cultural identity. Through this common identity, Chinese state media could people together.

Security and defense frames were often used when Chinese media posted about protesters being violent. They framed the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations as terrorism, which caused threat to individuals, but also to national security. The more violent actions were portrayed by Chinese state media, the more opposition Chinese people would show towards the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests.

**Characteristics of posts**

In this study, the characteristics of each post were examined from five perspectives: simplification, icons and symbolic representation, low-risk mobilization, virality, and visuality.

*Simplification.* According to the results of this study, most posts contained less than 150 Chinese characters despite the fact that Weibo had extended the word limit to 2000 characters. This finding was congruent with previous research results that Weibo users have

generally maintained the habit of publishing within the original limit (Che & Ip, 2017, p.89). On average, posts with high engagement tended to be shorter and had shorter headlines, or even had no headlines. In the social media environment, networks are vast, content is over-abundant, and time is limited. Therefore, Weibo posts tend to be short and concise so that people could understand the meaning without spending too much time.

Besides post length, post headlines can help catch people's attention and convey all necessary information in a short time. Overall, traditional news headlines were still dominant because they could help readers to comprehend the content within an established frame or genre (Joshua & Ashley, 2015). Quotations were also used by Chinese state media, followed by direct headlines. Traditional news headlines summarized a story; these two headlines highlighted particular facets of a story to direct attention. In the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstration issue, posts with higher engagement tended to use motivational headlines. As is mentioned above, most Chinese netizens were unable to show up to the scene of protests, the only thing they could do was to join online discussion and show support for the central government by reposting.

*Icons and symbolic representation.* In the Hong Kong case, there were five types of icons and symbolic representation: innocent victims, Hong Kong residents, celebrities, overseas students, and foreigners. For each type, Chinese state media depicted individual stories in detail. Despite the different identities of these icons, they all could resonate within multiple social clusters, thus catching the attention of Weibo users. For instance, people might feel angry about Uncle Luo's being attacked by Hong Kong rioters. They might praise Hong Kong residents, celebrities, overseas students and foreigners for voicing their support for the central government. What united people together was their common feelings towards violence and their sense of attachment to China.

*Low-risk mobilization*. Typically, low-risk action can help translate online actions into offline collective movements (Lim, 2013). While Chinese state media used low-risk action, such as reposting, to reinforce certain narratives like patriotism. The more people reposted the message, the more people would be exposed to the narrative. And by propagating the message to "repost and let the world know," the media effortlessly transformed participants to be part of the propaganda while providing them with instant gratification.

*Virality*. In the Hong Kong case, more types of positive emotions were employed in Weibo posts than negative emotions. Of all the 502 posts, anger – one of the classic negative emotions – was most frequently used. Of all the 78 posts with high engagement, anger along with enthusiasm and pride were frequently used. This could be explained by people's motivation for sharing. Some individuals share content for self-presentation purposes (Wojnicki & Godes, 2008), and consequently content filled with enthusiasm and pride may be shared more because they want to demonstrate their patriotism. Some individuals share content for self-enhancement. Sharing valuable or impactful content can enhance one's status by making one seem knowledgeable (Lee & Ma, 2012). Therefore, people may share those angry posts to express their attitude towards the dispute, thus showing others that they are staying updated with current affairs.

*Visuality*. The results of the study showed that Chinese state media preferred pictures to videos when posting about the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations. However, videos were most frequently used in posts with high engagement, followed by pictures. According to a survey of ads engagement, video tends to drive more engagement. With the combination of visuals and sound, video has the ability to include all other visual and auditory content. Although understanding and assessing photo information can be much faster than video, video forces scrolling users to stop and pay an extra second of attention to the post (Dopson, 2019).

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**Practical Implications**

The media are by far the most important source of information about politics and conflicts for people, which grants them considerable influence over citizens' perceptions, opinions and behavior. By reporting on certain conflicts, and representing conflicts they report on in particular ways, media strongly influence the dynamics and outcomes of conflicts, thus shaping the prospects of success of conflict parties. When framing political conflicts, countries with different political systems employ different framing strategies. For non-democratic regimes like China, the government usually relies on news media as one of many instruments to preserve their power.

In dealing with political disputes and protests, the framing strategy employed by the Chinese government in the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest movement can be applied to other non-democratic regimes. The strategy was to promote the "law and order" frame, in which oppositional activities are officially considered to be attempts to undermine political stability and to create chaos, especially in the interest of foreign powers.

The framing process could be adjusted based on the goals that the government or organization pursues. For governments who want to unite the people and ensure regime stability, diagnostic framing can be used more frequently, with an emphasis on responsibility attribution. Instead of attributing the responsibility for causing the problem to the government itself, a governmental agency could frame foreign powers or other external forces as responsible for social problems. As is mentioned above, the establishment of common enemies tends to increase the cohesiveness of the group (Morgan, Wisneski & Skitka, 2011). However, scholarship on crisis communication and reputation suggests that assigning blame or shifting responsibility may only be a successful response strategy under certain conditions, such as when the organization or government entity is not perceived to be at fault (e.g., portrayed as a victim in a crisis situation or if the crisis is an accident) (Coombs, 2013).

With the development of technology and tremendous growth in social media usage, the way these messages are crafted also matters. Online information emerges quickly and often disappears without a trace. To ensure that issues spread far and wide, a governmental agency should take into consideration the principles discussed above when crafting effective messages. First, content should be able to be consumed without spending too much time, and headlines should be condensed to accommodate a short attention span. The Chinese government should follow the original word limit of Weibo posts to ensure greater readability. Although news headlines have changed with the robust development of social media, traditional news headlines are still dominant because they usually incorporate all the essential elements of the news or the story. Even with limited time, readers can comprehend the news by scanning the headline.

Second, creating icons or symbolic representations which resonate within multiple social clusters can successfully grab the attention of social media users. One commonly used framing strategy was victimization framing. Victimization framing identifies specific villains or perpetrators whose actions purportedly threaten weaker individuals or groups (Lim, 2013). By depicting victims in news, the state-owned media can encourage audience participation. When audience members identify and relate to the plight of the victim, the audience may feel more connected to the victim, thus standing out to help solve the problem (Lim, 2013).

Third, low-risk, accessible and affordable action is suggested to be included in messages. For governments who impose restrictions on offline collective movements, online low-risk action, such as clicking, typing, and sharing, may be more suitable for stimulating enthusiasm and participation.

Fourth, certain emotional components in messages can function to determine the information dissemination. The research results implied that posts with higher engagement tended to convey enthusiasm and pride. In the subsample, 26% of the posts expressed

enthusiasm and 22% expressed pride. These results suggested that state-owned media tend to maximize the impact of uplifting emotions, such as enthusiasm and pride, to encourage participation, especially when framing political conflicts related to national sovereignty.

Finally, visualization elements such as photos and videos can exert influence on the information distribution. Although pictures and videos were both effective in motivating online participation, the results implied that posts with higher engagement tended to include a video. People have become used to digesting content while scrolling, making it easier to scroll through pictures without spending much time. While videos can grab more attention and cause people to focus more on the post. Governmental agencies should make better use of visualization elements, especially videos, to attract people's interest and motivate engagement.

# CHAPTER 7: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some limitations of this study stem from the nature of qualitative content analysis. Since the analysis was conducted by the individual researcher, there is no way to compare and cross check it against others. Also, while coding helps prevent bias from the researcher, the analysis is subject to the researcher's interpretation of emergent patterns. This makes it difficult to replicate the study and generalize it.

Due to limited time and resources, only representatives of Chinese state-owned media were selected in this study's sample. Chinese commercial media and foreign media outlets were not included in the study. Now that new framing processes and framing categories have been proposed in this research, it would be beneficial to examine whether they can be applied to other media outlets concerning different political disputes. Additionally, more research on framing comparisons is recommended among different types of Chinese media or even between Chinese media and foreign media.

Through the content analysis, this study created a new framing theme: framing of results or achievements and a new framing category: personal sympathy and support. Further research is needed to investigate the role of results framing in the framing process. To test whether this new framing category is exclusive and exhaustive, further examination through content analysis is recommended. Additionally, as the coding process in this study involved qualitatively coding predominant themes in each post, a future quantitative content analysis might also code for overlapping themes within each post to examine quantitatively the overlap in specific types of frames.

The literature review shows that certain characteristics can contribute to higher online participation and the sharing of digital content. This study solely used qualitative content analysis, and, therefore, future study is recommended to conduct a quantitative comparison between the subsample of posts with high engagement and the subsample of posts with low

engagement to examine differences between these two engagement groups. Future research is also recommended to further explore the correlation between the characteristics of posts and engagement rate through quantitative content analysis. In addition, future research is recommended to further explore visuality in terms of picture content, video content and video length.

# CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored the framing of the 2019-20 Hong Kong protest movement by Chinese state-owned media on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter. A content analysis of 502 Weibo posts highlighted the four-step framing process and the prevalence of 12 news frames. A subsample of posts was then content analyzed to identify the characteristics of posts with high engagement. The study findings suggest that certain events in the period surrounding the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations followed a four-step framing process: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, motivational framing and framing of results. Prognostic framing was sometimes neglected so as to put emphasis on problem diagnoses, especially when the responsibility of causing chaos in Hong Kong was often attributed to foreign powers. Law and order frame was most frequently used, which put emphasis on the violence and drama of protests, while shifting attention away from their goals and undermining their legitimacy as political actors. In terms of online participation, short narratives that are associated with symbolic representations and low-risk mobilization may have a higher chance of going viral. Posts which include emotional components or visualization elements are more likely to generate participation. This study highlights the importance of framing political conflicts that are closely related to regime stability and message crafting that are important to the success of online campaigns.

# APPENDIX

**ITEM A: CODING PROTOCAL**

**Introduction**

This study, "Framing Political Issues: A Content Analysis of Chinese Weibo Posts about the 2019-20 Hong Kong Demonstrations," will investigate how the Chinese state-owned media used Weibo to frame the 2019-20 Hong Kong demonstrations and why the narratives were able to facilitate political participation.

**Coding Protocol**

A. **Enter basic information from post. May enter full post.**
   Examples: a) #Firmly support Hong Kong in ending violence, chaos and restoring order#! # Show China's attitude to the world#! (#坚定支持香港止暴制乱恢复秩序#！#向世界亮明中国态度#！) b) Hong Kong is China's Hong Kong, we won't let it "sink." (香港是中国的香港，我们不会让她沉沦。)

B. **Overall Theme of post (including hashtag):**
   1. Date of publication
   2. Describe the DOMINANT theme of the post.
      - Does the post identify the problem and the cause of it? Why is this issue problematic, how it became a problem and who is responsible for it?
      - Does the post propose a solution to the diagnosed problem? What is the solution, what needs to be done and who will be responsible for carrying out the solution?
      - Does the post represents a call to action? What action does it call for?
      - These posts do not fit into any of the above categories. Please record qualitative impressions for these posts.

C. **Framing categories:**
   1. Describe what is discussed in the post and identify its framing category(ies).
      - What information does the post provide?
      - Does the post mention costs, benefits or monetary implications of the Hong Kong extradition bill protests?
      - Does the post mention availability of physical, geographical, spatial, human and financial resources, or the capacity of existing systems and resources to implement or carry out proposed solutions?
      - Does the post contain moral messages or any other sense of ethics or social responsibility?
      - Does the post mention equality or inequality with which laws, punishment, rewards and resources are applied or distributed among individuals or groups?
      - Does the post mention constrains imposed on or freedoms granted to individuals, government and corporations?

- Does the post mention particular policies proposed for addressing the Hong Kong extradition bill protests, and figuring out if certain policies will work, or if existing policies are effective?
- Does the post mention specific laws in practice and their enforcement, incentives, and implications?
- Does the post mention security issues, threats to security, and protection of one's person, family, in-group, nation, etc?
- Does the post mention healthcare access and effectiveness, illness, disease, sanitation, obesity, mental health effects, infrastructure and safe building?
- Does the post mention individuals' wealth, mobility, access to resources, happiness, social structures, ease of day-to-day routines, quality of community life, etc?
- Does the post mention social norms, trends, values and customs constituting cultures?
- Does the post mention references to general social attitudes, polling and demographic information, as well as implied or actual consequences of diverging from or getting ahead of public opinion or polls?
- Does the post mention external relations with another nation, e.g., trade agreements and outcomes, policy outcomes?
- These posts do not fit into any of the above categories. Please record qualitative impressions for these posts.

**D. Characteristics of post**
1. Simplification
   a. Length of the post
   b. Length of the title
   c. Content of the title
      - What information does the title provide? Does it summarize the post?
2. Icons and Symbolic Representations
   a. Identify and describe the non-ideological and compelling figure(s) depicted in the post.
3. Low-risk mobilization
   a. Identify and describe the accessible and affordable action in the post, such as clicking and sharing.
4. Virality
   a. Identify and describe the emotional component(s) in the post.
      - Example: love, disgust, joy, anger, sadness, fear and surprise
5. Visuality
   a. Identify what kind of visualization element is included in the post
      - Example: picture, video and link

**E. Number of reposts**

**F. Number of comments**

**G. Number of likes**

**H. Number of followers**

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