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Short Paper

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Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary findings of a netnographic case study that investigates how online brand defending and attacking behaviours are influenced by ideological polarisation. Mirror, a Cantopop group from Hong Kong that pro-Beijing Internet users have targeted, has been selected as the subject of this study. Our preliminary findings show that online brand defending and attacking behaviours for or against a brand may be explained by a modified, looped Belief-Action-Outcome (BAO) framework under ideological polarisation, which complements existing research on Internet users' impact on brand management and sheds light on politically-driven online brand-attacking behaviours. Results also show that brand-attacking behaviours would further polarise, and thus de-stabilise society. We plan to collect and incorporate further data for more in-depth analyses for building a holistic model to explain the relationships of ideological polarisation on brand defending and attacking behaviours, and their impacts on business and organisation strategies.

Keywords: Mirror, Case Study, Ideological Polarisation, Consumers' Online Brand Defending

Introduction

Discussions around various products and services among Internet users have become increasingly common (Tsai, 2013). Users may express support for their favourite companies or brands with positive comments on different online communities and review websites, defend the companies/brands against criticisms from others, or even proactively attack the competitors of their preferred companies/brands (Au et al., 2021; Colliander & Wien, 2013). These discussions, in turn, significantly impact the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) of companies and brands. For example, in 2020, Josh Cahill, a German blogger, openly criticised the unengaging services of Singapore Airlines (SQ), which triggered vigorous responses and threats from some SQ supporters (Ong, 2020). Known as consumers' online brand defending, these behaviours may be

triggered by factors such as the attribution of guilt, perceived justice, and expectation discrepancy (Au et al., 2021; Colliander & Wien, 2013). While these brand-defending behaviours may sometimes mitigate the damage brought by critics to a brand, they may also lead to customer dissatisfaction and ultimately harm the brand, possibly including brand-attacking acts. At their core, these behaviours are related to conflicts between Internet users (Dineva et al., 2017). Under ideological polarisation, when the aggressiveness of Internet users increases (Au et al., 2021), online conflicts may become more common in political and consumption behaviour contexts (Au, 2023). Such aggressiveness may turn into brand defending or attacking behaviour (Collandier and Wien, 2013), but current literature has not shown adequate direct evidence to illustrate the role of polarisation-induced aggressiveness on these brand-related behaviours. In addition, previous research on ideological polarisation has mainly focused on societal outcomes, leaving its impact on eWOM and other aspects of the business environment unaddressed. Such gaps may lead to incorrect strategies for managing a brand's online presence.

This paper aims to present a case study of the Cantopop group, Mirror, which has gained exceptional popularity since 2020 and has been considered to revitalise the Cantopop and Hong Kong showbiz industry. However, they have also faced criticisms and attacks from some pro-Beijing Internet users, given the impact of ideological polarisation on daily consumption behaviours in Hong Kong. In response, Mirror's fans have tried to defend their favourite group. By identifying the brand-defending and attacking behaviours related to Mirror and its affiliated brands, we hope to shed light on the impact of ideological polarisation on these behaviours. Accordingly, our research question (RQ) is, "How does ideological polarisation affect online brand defending and attacking behaviours?"

Literature Review

Online Brand Attacking and Defending Behaviours

References	Arguments
Hickman and Ward (2007)	Brand defending behaviours of fans can be seen when others openly complain about their favourite brands and when fans of rival brands attack. These attacks between two groups of fans may be in the form of trash-talking and schadenfreude.
Colliander and Dahlén (2011)	Consumers' voice support towards the brand on social media may be considered unbiased and generate more parasocial interactions and, thus, more credible and persuasive than the company itself.
Chang et al. (2013)	Brand community members may prevent breakdowns of the brand's image. In addition, they may attain social needs and satisfaction by maintaining relationships with the brand, while the brand benefits from customers' advocacy and defence.
Japutra et al. (2014)	Subject to a robust brand attachment, loyal customers may defend the brand if they hear others (such as fans from rival brands) saying negative things about it. For example, they may challenge the attacks from rival brands for being false or to share their positive experience with their favourite brand.
Hassan and Casaló Ariño (2016)	Considering the brand as an extension of their self-image, some fans may want to protect their self-esteem and, thus, defend the brand online. These behaviours can be more effective than marketers' actions to deter aggravation on brands' eWOM.
Ilhan et al. (2018)	In response to the vigorous competition between brands, marketers may consider inducing fans' brand attacks and defending behaviours. These may lead to broader social media brand engagement and increase and prolong the effects of managerial control variables, such as communication campaigns and new product introductions.
Table 1. Previous Arguments related to Consumers' Brand Defending Behaviours	

The Internet has made it easier for companies/brands to attract fans (Dong & Zhang, 2016) and for fans to defend the companies/brands. According to Colliander and Wien (2013), consumers' brand defending behaviours refer to consumers' actions that support a company/brand in response to criticisms or complaints about its products/services. Such defending behaviours can be more effective than the company/brand's reactions to complaints (Hassan & Casaló Ariño, 2016) and are often triggered by attacks

from fans of rival companies/brands (Hickman & Ward, 2007; Japutra et al., 2014). Loyal consumers may defend their favourite brands through actions, such as trash-talking (the actions of offending one's competitor verbally, usually being the result of consumers' desire to positively differentiate a particular brand from its rivals, see Hickman & Ward, 2007) and schadenfreude (malicious pleasure feelings based on others' failure or misfortune, see Feather & Sherman, 2002), possibly because they consider the brand an extension of their self-image (Hassan & Casaló Ariño, 2016). Table 1 shows a list of arguments related to consumers' online brand defending. While online comments and complaints may damage a company or brand's eWOM (See-To & Ho, 2014), consumers' online brand defending messages may help handle negative information and protect the brand's eWOM, given that consumers' voice support towards the brand on social media is often considered credible. While marketers may encourage consumers to defend their companies/brands (Hassan & Casaló Ariño, 2016; Ilhan et al., 2018), these behaviours often involve posting disagreeing or defensive comments that may be aggressive in various forms (Dineva et al., 2020). This may harm businesses (Dineva et al., 2017) by, for example, harming their reputation and credibility (Fisk et al., 2010). Moreover, ideological polarisation may enlarge individuals' aggressiveness (Au, 2023), increasing the likelihood of brand defending or attacking behaviour (Collandier and Wien, 2013) and other consequences. But as of now, more empirical studies are needed to explore the impact of ideological polarisation on these behaviours.

Ideological Polarisation

Ideological polarisation is a state referring to "*the extent to which opinions on an issue are in relation to some theoretical maximum,*" and polarisation is a process that "*refers to the increase in such opposition over time*" (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 693). To some extent, this phenomenon is triggered by social media feeds, which usually show users content that confirms their existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2009), resulting in echo chambers (Chan & Fu, 2017). Other factors contributing to polarisation include cognitive biases, empathic concern towards a particular political camp, malicious intentions, and online misinformation, which may lead to the manifestation of previously hidden conflicts in values between individuals in society (Au et al., 2022; Spohr, 2017). As a result, the diversity of opinions, arguments, and opinion expression channels may be compromised. People may actively look for alternative forms of political expression (Au & Ho, 2021), tend to confirm their pre-existing views (Wong et al., 2016), and may ignore opposite viewpoints or facts that would disprove their arguments (Rochlin, 2017). For businesses, inactions may lead to market unpredictability and public perception as tacit support for one side (Reeves et al., 2021). Table 2 lists the arguments related to the enablers of ideological polarisation, while Table 3 lists the arguments related to the processes and impact. But among these arguments, little has been discussed about the impact of ideological polarisation on the business environment. For example, Lee et al. (2022) highlighted the increased perceived uncertainty in the business environment because of ideological polarisation, but their findings were related to political lobbying of Multinational Enterprise (MNE), which may be irrelevant for businesses operating within a single market. Neureiter and Bhattacharya (2021) studied eight cases to illustrate how critical events of firms may lead to boycotts under different contexts. However, the chosen cases did not last very long and mainly took place before the global ideological polarisation became significant, and thus may not accurately guide businesses on understanding or managing their brand or eWOM in a more polarised environment.

References	Arguments
	Enablers
Chan and Fu (2017)	Online activities are commonly divided into special groups within the virtual spaces known as "echo chambers". Information sharing between like-minded information seekers/producers is associated with online polarisation within each group.
Spohr (2017)	Different forms of cognitive bias drive readers to interact with content confirming our pre-existing views and polarising offline and online society.
Au et al. (2022)	Ideological polarisation is often a result of malicious intentions mixed with online misinformation, which misleads the public. Some online debates, personal attacks, and political incentives may catalyse polarisation.
Table 2. A Selected List of Arguments Related to Enablers of Ideological Polarisation	

| References	Arguments
Process	
Sunstein (2009)	The Internet can increase ideological polarisation by gathering like-minded people to discuss political issues. They may end up polarising each other's political viewpoints.
Harris et al. (2014)	When the issues are non-divisive, people are less likely to engage in biased information processing and searching. With accuracy-oriented instead of directional-oriented reasoning goals, trends toward moderation are possible.
Lee et al. (2014)	Network heterogeneity is associated with higher polarisation among people who frequently discuss politics. Within the discussion, biased information processing could be at work and reinforce the discussants' existing opinions.
Impact	
Spohr (2017)	Ideological polarisation leads to a loss of diversity of opinions and arguments. People in homogenous groups may even ignore facts that would disprove their arguments.
Au and Ho (2021)	In an ideologically polarised environment, conventional opinion expression channels may become diminished. Internet users may adopt other ways to express their political viewpoints, possibly including schadenfreude towards political opponents.
Reeves et al. (2021)	Under the rising political polarisation, companies' inactions in response to political controversies may increase market unpredictability caused by public misinformation or be perceived as tacit support for one side of an issue.
Neureiter and Bhattacharya (2021)	In highly polarised environments, a critical event of firms may trigger political controversies, leading to sustained boycotts/boycotts if there is a high issue salience. With low political congruence, sales may significantly decrease.
Table 3. A Selected List of Arguments Related to Processes and Impact of Ideological Polarisation	

Research Method

We adopted a netnographic case study for several reasons. First, case research methods are robust at exploring 'how' research questions (Benbasat et al., 1987) and processes inseparable from their contexts (Rynes & Gephart Jr, 2004). Second, given consumers' online brand defending involving multiple dimensions (including external and technological), it has become too complicated to adopt an objective research approach (Gable, 1994). Therefore, a case study approach is more appropriate for examining such phenomena, as it facilitates interpreting the understanding of different stakeholders (Klein & Myers, 1999). Given the exploratory nature of our study on a less-addressed phenomenon, we deemed a single-case research design suitable (Benbasat et al., 1987). Also, netnography is a written account of studying the cultures and communities that emerge from Internet-based communications. The traditions and techniques methodologically inform both the fieldwork and the textual interpretation of cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 2010). It can help discover more profound insights from experiences less addressed in earlier research (Langer & Beckman, 2005) and may be used with qualitative methods (Kozinets, 2010). As we analyse Internet users' online activities, netnography become a suitable option.

In response to our RQ, we established a few case selection criteria. First, the brand should be well-known and highly successful so that we can identify more data and online discussion around the brand. Second, the selected brand should have been attacked and defended by two groups of people in an ideologically polarised context. Based on these criteria, we selected Hong Kong Cantopop group, Mirror, as our study target, which has been considered a revitalising force in the Hong Kong showbiz industry. And yet, Hong Kong has been ideologically polarised since 2014, while Mirror has been attacked by some Internet users, especially those who perceive Mirror to be opposing their political beliefs, despite no open political expressions made by any of their members. Our preliminary findings also suggested that the defending and attacking messages were often mixed with political beliefs, which are less likely to happen if it is only personal preference in performance or appearance that play a role. For example, the attacking and defending behaviour of fans of the Hong Kong Four Heavenly Kings in the 1990s were vigorous but

apolitical, given Hong Kong was less ideologically polarised at that time. All these suggested Mirror a suitable study target.

We are currently collecting data from various sources specific to our RQ and exploring the phenomenon of consumers' online brand defending under ideological polarisation. We primarily reviewed online discussions regarding the news and activities of Mirror, with the associated news articles also included in our dataset. We selected multiple Mirror-related online communities and social media pages (with varying stances towards Mirror), given owing to the ideological polarisation, some online communities and pages may have become echo chambers with overwhelming voices on one side. This allows us to triangulate and reach a more balanced view of the phenomenon. Considering the proliferation of Internet-water-army, only comments from genuine users were included in our data. For example, some users constantly create highly similar comments without substantial content. We assumed that these were driven by brand owners instead of individuals' voluntary actions and accordingly excluded these comments. Data analysis is performed concurrently with data collection to take full advantage of the flexibility case research methods afford (Eisenhardt, 1989). A set of aggregate theoretical dimensions and second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) were first derived from the existing literature on consumers' online brand defending and ideological polarisation to serve as the theoretical lens to guide our data collection. The data collected was then coded using a mix of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). More specifically, open coding was used to identify new and validate existing theoretical dimensions (e.g., consumers' online brand defending and ideological polarisation), while axial coding was used to identify new and validate existing, second-order themes that fall under those dimensions (e.g., enablers of consumers' online brand defending and outcomes of ideological polarisation). Selective coding was then used to distil our case evidence into a number of first-order categories, which were then assigned to the appropriate dimensions and themes (Pan & Tan, 2011). Visual mapping and narrative strategies were also used to help us make sense of the voluminous amount of data collected (Klein & Myers, 1999; Langley, 1999). The former involved documenting, for example, the key milestones of Mirror's development and various cause-consequence relationships (see Figure 1 for an example, which condensed various visual maps created during the data analysis). The latter entailed creating a textual summary of the key events, activities, and decisions that transpired concerning consumers' online brand defending behaviour. Iterations between data, analysis, and theory development will continue until theoretical saturation is reached (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Preliminary Findings

Figure 1. Our Theoretical Model on Consumers' Online Brand defending in the Era of Ideological Polarisation
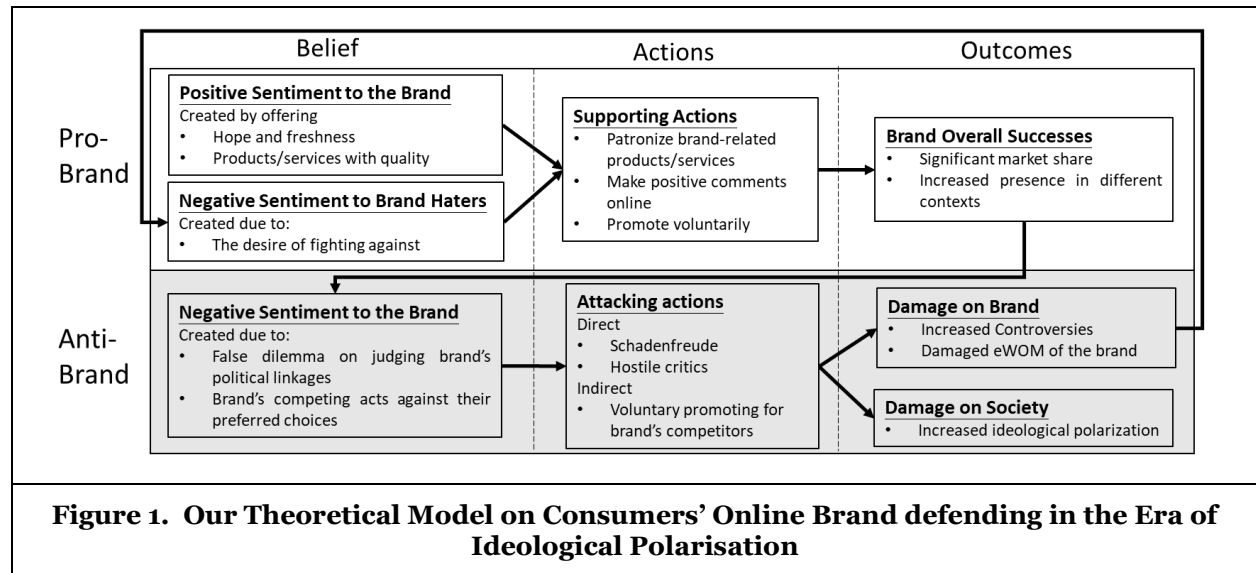
Our preliminary findings suggested that under ideological polarisation, online brand defending and attacking behaviours for or against a brand may be explained using a modified, looped Belief-Action-Outcome (BAO) framework (See Figure 1). The BAO framework can be used to explain the relationship between an individual belief, their subsequent actions and the resulting outcomes. Developed by Melville

(2010), it was initially related to green information systems (IS) innovations but has been adopted in different IS research.

By offering (1) hope and freshness and (2) products/services with quality, a brand may trigger fans' positive sentiment and support. The offering of hope and freshness may be reflected by, for example, the lyrics of Mirror's songs, which often appealed to hope and dream-chasing. For the song "Masking Mouth to Say I Love You", sung by Keung To (a Mirror member), part of the lyrics were as follows,

> *"So I say I love you. Only love lasts forever. Living in a disaster, but the heart has never been stained. Even if God gave me poverty, sickness, and hardship, I will smile to endure hardship, and I don't hate anyone..."*

Given the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, the song cheered up many Hongkongers and was well received. On YouTube, there were over 10 million hits on its MV. An Internet user commented as follows,

> *"It is the best anti-pandemic song, full of positive power with a warm singing voice. With brisk and natural dancing steps, it makes the audience watch it comfortably."*

The recognition of the brand's quality may also be identified from the MV pages of these songs on YouTube. For example, on the YouTube MV page of Mirror's debut song "Within a Second", comments of appreciation were commonly found since the MV was released,

> *"I have been longing for that. In Hong Kong, there have been no such boy groups. It is so passionate!"*

> *"The smile of Jeremy (a member of Mirror) was so sweet. It was so bright and shiny."*

These positive sentiments were converted into actions such as patronising brand-related products/services, making positive comments online, and promoting the brand voluntarily. For example, when McDonald Hong Kong launched a series of Mirror-featured advertisements and gift cards, there was a craze of redemption, along with the emergence of scalpers. In addition, positive comments towards Mirror may be found in various MVs of Mirror's songs, as mentioned in the example of the song "Within a Second". Some fans even voluntarily paid for advertisements in different places in the hope of supporting Mirror. As a result, Mirror achieved overall success, which might be reflected by its significant market shares and increased presence in different contexts. Many advertisers invited Mirror to endorse their brands, such as Samsung, HSBC, McDonald, Deliveroo, Colgate, Versace, and Swarovski. The estimated cost of Mirror-related advertisement reached 30 million HKD (approximately 3.85M USD). Moreover, in a Music Award event in 2021, the Mirror members were four of the five finalists of the most favourite male singer award.

In an ideologically polarised environment, however, people can easily fall into the false dilemma of judging a brand's political linkages (Spohr, 2017). They may perceive certain brands to be on the opposite side of their political stance. In addition, when these emerging brands compete with their preferred choices, they may attack the emerging brands on the Internet in forms of, for example, (1) hostile critics and (2) schadenfreude. In online contexts, these attacking actions may become even more radical than those in offline contexts (Au et al., 2022). Mirror is affiliated with ViuTV, whose news department has been regarded as less pro-Beijing compared to its main competitor TVB. Therefore, some radical pro-Beijing camp members perceived ViuTV to tactically support the pro-democracy camp (Reeves et al., 2021). Some TVB fans formed Mirror-hater Facebook groups. One such group, named "My boss has got schizophrenia because of scared of the annoying guys", implies Mirror's passionate fans were annoying. Also, the group logo has even been modified to resemble Mirror's original logo, but with the Chinese word "fuck" added to it. Hostile critics towards Mirror were commonly found within the group, with profanities often mixed. For example, in mid-2022, "Chili Laugh Story", a movie starred with Mirror member Edan Lui and other well-known Hong Kong actors, was released in both Hong Kong's movie theatres and some movie festivals in North America. These triggered attacks from Mirror-haters in different aspects, from actors' in-movie appearances to the political motivations of movie festival organisers.

> *"There are so many good Asian movies they did not choose, but why are they choosing this one? From the day when the Kappa[1] was on the cover of the TIME magazine, I know these Western powers are trouble-makers who try to achieve their target at all costs."*

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[1] Kappa is a derogatory nickname used by the pro-Beijing camp to refer to pro-democracy politician Joshua Wong.

" All three of them (Edan and two other actors) were so ugly. Do they have a common biological mum?"

These critics were often extended to other related brands or celebrities. For example, when Carol Cheng, an experienced Hong Kong actress and host, interviewed Keung To, some Mirror-haters extended their sentiment and attacked Cheng.

"It looks so disgusting for her to please those without talent and appearance."

"Since 2019, when she supported the so-called youngsters (in the pro-democracy protests) with tears, I did not expect her."

On the other hand, they often demonstrate justifying brand defending behaviours (Colliander and Wien, 2013) by, for example, appreciating TVB-affiliated human brands, such as Gigi Yim. These appreciations, similarly, often come together with attacks towards Mirror.

"I sometimes will think, luckily Gigi started her showbiz career in TVB, instead of the devil ViuTV. Otherwise, the remaining clear spring that can defend against the devil will be lost."

Beyond hostile critics, they often made schadenfreude speeches about different Mirror-related accidents, such as the major accident at Mirror's concert in July 2022. A 600-kg monitor hanging on the stage's roof dropped on the ground during the concert, leading to a dancer's serious injury. While many singers empathised with the injured dancers and all Mirror members, some pro-Beijing Internet users expressed schadenfreude speech (Au & Ho, 2021), which labelled Mirror with some political stances.

"Why it was not those yellow dead bodies being injured.... Hong Kong has become a mess all because of those scum. They should all go to hell as soon as possible."

As a result, the attacked brand suffered from increased controversies and damaged eWOM (See-To & Ho, 2014). After the concert accident, Mirror suffered from dropped popularity, which may be reflected by, for example, the decreased number of Instagram followers of Mirror's members and the number of Mirror-related searches on Google. In addition, some critics highlighted Mirror's overall regressing performance.

"The newer song was not as good as before. I am unsure if it was the intervention from the senior management, but after they became popular, their songs were so empty."

"In 2021, their songs were good. But in 2022, they are lazy and hypocritical, which led to their crashes."

In response, Mirror's fans strengthened their supporting actions and fought against the haters to defend Mirror (Hassan & Casaló Ariño, 2016). For example, they screen-captured haters' attacking comments and shared them on their internal fans' groups, along with different critics. Some Mirror fans also demonstrated vouching brand defending behaviour (Colliander and Wien 2013) by highlighting Mirror's more outstanding performances than those of artists which Mirror-haters endorsed (Harris et al., 2014). These attacks and defences appeared to be around Mirror, but the comments were often mixed with radical comments and political judgement (e.g., verbal attacks towards Carol Cheng and Joshua Wong). Therefore, these comments have indeed ideologically polarised society. Both haters and fans groups became echo chambers (Chan & Fu, 2017) without diverse opinions and arguments (Spohr, 2017).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Our in-progress work to date hints at several potential theoretical contributions. First, our study presents a model that explains consumers' online brand defending behaviour under ideological polarisation based on a modified, looped Belief-Action-Outcome (BAO) Framework. This complements the existing research on the impact of Internet users on brand management and sheds light on politically-driven online brand-attacking behaviours, which were neglected in the existing literature. More specifically, positive sentiment towards the brand may lead to fans' supporting actions (e.g., patronising brand-related products/services, making positive online comments, and promoting the brand voluntarily), which foster the brand's overall success. However, under ideological polarisation, this may also trigger non-fans' attention. Some may perceive a false dilemma in judging the brand's political linkages (Spohr, 2017). When the subject brand competes against the preferred choices of these non-fans, their negative sentiment toward the subject brand may be induced, which may lead to their brand attacking actions (Hickman and Ward, 2007). This may be understood as a spillover of their political belief into non-political contexts. On the other hand, the brand's fans would defend against these attacks, possibly by strengthening their brand-supporting actions, which

lead to a reinforcing loop of belief, actions, and outcomes of both fans and non-fans. In turn, the brand is damaged (See-To and Ho, 2014), while society is damaged (Au et al., 2022).

While brand switching, attacking, and defending behaviour may still occur in a regular market, these behaviours are less likely to be associated with intermingled political messages and ideologies if there is no or less influence of ideological polarisation. Also, we are aware that not all criticisms of Mirror come from pro-Beijing Internet users, and we acknowledge that criticisms based on fair comments and facts should be respected. However, personal attacks on singers or celebrities based solely on political viewpoints should not be accepted as they will hinder constructive political discussion and polarise society. Direct competitors of Mirror and ViuTV, such as TVB, could have discouraged hate and attacking actions of their supporters. Unfortunately, it seems these actions have never become their concerns.

We contend the generalizability of our case study is based on the principle of analytical generalization, given the model developed is grounded on empirical evidence and corroborated by established literature. Our subsequent research will extend and validate our process model by collecting and analysing additional data from Mirror and its surrounding entities. Other brands (especially non-human brands) that were attacked and defended under the influence of ideological polarisation may also be studied. These may explicate the boundary conditions and implications of our model and identify the role of other confounding variables. In turn, we may build a more holistic understanding of the impact of these behaviours and, thus, its strategic and organisational implications.

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