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"What Else Can We Do?"

An examination into sustained anti-authoritarian mobilization in

Hong Kong's Yellow Economic Circle

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Abstract

Civil liberties and freedoms have diminished globally due to the last decades' deepened authoritarianism. Concurrently, mobilizations countering this development have decreased. Hong Kong represents one of the cases where anti-authoritarian resistance has been sustained, which sparks a question regarding what motivates people in expanding authoritarian spaces to engage in contentious politics. This thesis aims to understand why people engage in contentious activities when it can implicate them under growing authoritarianism in Hong Kong. This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with individuals participating in Hong Kong's Yellow Economic Circle, a movement relying on strategies derived from political consumerism. Looking at the discourses, spaces, and practices which drive this mobilization, this thesis found that the movement's decentralized aspect allows for individual agency through everyday activism. The perception of low risks related to the movement, along with the facilitation of social media, allows for broader dissemination of the movement. Moreover, the thesis found that democracy was the main discourse for individuals' initial engagement but not the main discourse behind sustained commitment. Instead, what drives individuals to participate in contentious political activities in Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian setting is the continuity of a collective identity.

Keywords: *Anti-authoritarianism, Contentious Politics, Democracy, Hong Kong, Mobilization, Yellow Economic Circle*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation for study

The last two decades' global democratic recession and deepened authoritarianism have culminated in diminished civil liberties and freedoms (Diamond, 2015). In 2019, the levels of mobilization in relation to the rising number of autocratizing nations reached an all-time high globally (Ogden, 2022). However, since 2020, despite the continual expansion of authoritarianism, the relative levels of mobilization have instead decreased. V-Dems 2022 democracy report (Boese et al, 2022) points to COVID-19 restrictions for limiting the possibilities of assembly but further points to how several autocratic or authoritarian governments have used the pandemic as a pretext to restrict freedoms further, repressing protestors, and targeted media (for case studies, see Badran & Turnbull, 2022; Barceló et al, 2022; Eck & Hatz, 2020; Ezeibe et al, 2022; Grasse et al, 2021).

Since its establishment as a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, the political development of Hong Kong efficiently illustrates the aforementioned global issue. The China-imposed authoritarian agenda has gradually fragmented the existing democratic structures[1] in the region (Chan, 2022). This fragmentation has been met with popular contention[2] throughout the years, most often expressed through large-scale mobilizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic the Hong Kong government, prompted by the Chinese government, implemented a National Security Law (NSL) on June 30, 2020, effectively incriminating all public expressions of anti-government sentiments[3].

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[1] The democratic structures refer to measures to protect the individual's opportunities for influence and to promote and guarantee respect for human rights. In terms of free elections, Hong Kong moved towards universal suffrage during the colonial era, but this development halted after the 1997 handover (Maizland, 2022).

[2] This thesis understands contentious politics as "collective activity on the part of claimants- or those who claim to represent them-relying at least in part on noninstitutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents, or the state" (Tarrow, 1996: 874). Political contention is based on disruptive techniques to make political points (Tilly, 2008: 5).

[3] The NSL specifies four vaguely defined crimes; secession; subversion; terrorist activities; and collusion with foreign forces, which restricts freedom of speech, the right to assemble, and other basic rights (Davis, 2022: 102).

This ceased open resistance against the growing authoritarianism in Hong Kong (AFP, 2020; Zhang & Gu, 2022). Instead of following the global trend and fully disseminating, political contention in Hong Kong has persisted through other means of mobilization, most notably through the 'Yellow Economic Circle' (YEC), in which individuals actively support businesses that are positive towards the pro-democracy movement, while avoiding those against it (Li & Whitworth, 2022). Being one of the few means of open resistance remaining in the region, participation in the circle effectively keeps the momentum of the large-scale pro-democracy movement in the post-NSL era.

There are a substantial number of studies framing and conceptualizing contentious politics in general (see Chapter 3) and in spaces where democracy is experiencing regression in particular. Nonetheless, there is still a lack of depth in current studies looking at contentious politics, particularly concerning understanding what drives individuals to engage in contentious acts in places where a democratic breakdown has occurred. Given China's involvement in influencing political developments in East Asia, the continuous movement in Hong Kong makes for an intriguing case study. According to Freedom House (Boyajian & Cook, 2019), Human Rights Watch (Stauffer, 2019), and Ogden (2022), the global democratic recession is predicted to offer China more opportunities to extend its authoritarian policies, thereby further reducing civil liberties. In turn, it would imply that Hong Kong's political development will continue along its current path, making an analysis of its counter-movement extremely pertinent. Further, Wong, Kwong, and Chan (2021) released survey data from the YEC that revealed widespread disbelief amongst the participants concerning the institutional impact of contentious acts. This makes Hong Kong an interesting case to examine, seeing how the movement is sustained even though the participants are not expecting their engagement to yield any substantial structural reform. This prompts questions about why people participate in contentious politics, which may have a negative impact on them personally when they do not anticipate any measurable advancement from it. This renders

contentious politics in Hong Kong complex, again making it an intriguing case to investigate.

1.2   Purpose and outline

The overarching motivation behind this thesis is to gain greater knowledge of what motivates individuals in expanding authoritarian spaces to engage in contentious politics. The study focuses on the pro-democracy resistance movement in Hong Kong, specifically on the sustained engagement in the YEC in the post-NSL era. Specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to understand how and why individuals engage in contentious activities when it can implicate them under the growing authoritarian rule in Hong Kong. As stated by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 313-314), a study into a specific case of contentious politics is unsuitable for generalizing contention. Instead, it helps map the dynamics of a case that will help us understand contentious mechanisms and patterns to a greater extent. Therefore, this thesis aims to map said mechanisms and patterns in the case of Hong Kong to add to the literary treasury on mobilization and contentious politics in authoritarian contexts. The study will proceed based on the following research question:

What mobilizes individuals to sustain their participation in contentious political activities in Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian setting?

Having offered a brief overview of what prompted this study, detailed its aims and purposes as well as presented a research question in this introductory chapter, the thesis will in the next chapter introduce the context in which the study will operate. This is done in order to inform readers who are unacquainted with anti-authoritarian mobilization and the Hong Kong case. Chapter 3 summarizes relevant previous research on the subject, presenting what is already known about contentious politics and resistance in authoritarian settings in general and Hong Kong in particular. Chapter 4 moves into the theoretical section of the thesis and

outlines the framework used to study and analyze the collected data. Here, the theoretical grounding and dimensions of analyses will be presented. Chapter 5 presents the methodology chosen for the study, the qualitative research design, the methods for collecting and analyzing the data, and the limitations and ethical concerns of the study. Chapter 6 consists of an empirical analysis in which the findings will be presented. In Chapter 7, a discussion of the analysis will be presented, where the findings will be related to the more extensive debate on contentious politics derived from earlier studies and the theoretical framework. In the final part, Chapter 8, the study concludes and offers some potential avenues for further research.

2 Background

To analyze the relevance of contemporary contention in Hong Kong, it is vital to describe the political context in which it occurs. As a result, this chapter will give a quick summary of the case that will serve as the foundation for the thesis and describe the political environment in which it is placed.

2.1 The political context in Hong Kong

Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841 and remained as such until 1997, with the exception of a few years of Japanese occupation during World War II (Carroll, 2007: 1). Hong Kong was during the colonial years integrated into the global economy, and the socio-economic development bloomed, establishing the basis for the financial center it is considered to be (Carroll, 2007: 7). The process of 'decolonization' commenced in 1972 when the People's Republic of China, which from here on will be referred to interchangeably as 'China' or 'the mainland', declared Hong Kong's future to be an internal Chinese matter (Carroll, 2007: 7). Since the end of British colonial rule in 1997, Hong Kong has been situated as a Special Administrative Region of China, in which hybrid governance under the 'One Country, Two Systems'-principle[4] has contrasted China's authoritarian regime with the region's established structures of democratic governance through its Legislative Council (LegCo) (Chen & Lo, 2017; Fong, 2021; Smyth, Bianco, & Chan, 2019). A Sino-British Joint Declaration on the terms of the handover was written in 1984, which, together with Hong Kong's Basic Law[5], grants Hong Kong independent, executive, and legislative powers until 2047 (Maizland, 2022). Although Hong Kong has never been a full democracy, it has been considered a democratic hub in the region as these declarations have safeguarded its development towards becoming a liberal democracy (Ortmann, 2016). Since the 1997 handover, however, interference

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[4] A principle under the Chinese constitution which grants Hong Kong protection of its political system until 2047 (So, 2011).
[5] Constitutional document enacted under the constitution of China (Maizland, 2022).

from the mainland has gradually diminished the existing structures. This can be exemplified by the mainland-driven reinterpretation of Hong Kong's Basic Law in 2004 and 2007, which granted the mainland further influence on the legal system (Tai, 2013). Following this, the bypassing of Hong Kong's legislature through the imposing of the NSL in 2020 (Lau & Sharon Yam, 2021; Maizland, 2022) and the 2021 restructuring of the electoral system to give a mainland-dominated Election Committee control of the election of members in government (Lau & Sharon Yam, 2021) has broken down democratic structures in Hong Kong. This is illustrated by Freedom House's (2023) 'Freedom in the World' index, which in 2023 signified an all-time low rating for Hong Kong.

2.2   A city of protests

In conjunction with the institutional development in Hong Kong, low rates of political participation have led to a perception of political apathy amongst Hongkongers (Chuanli & Fei, 2018). This can, however, be debunked by looking at the non-institutional political activities of the early localist movement in the 1950s (Tang & Cheng, 2022). The failure to honor the degree of autonomy as well as the political and legal systems has increased the political consciousness in the region as Hongkongers have grown increasingly disillusioned with the current political affairs (Hui, 2020). This has led to more people participating in political activities (Kuah-Pearce, 2009: 92) and, in effect, a shift in mobilization activities, particularly the increase in number, scale, and intensity of popular contention. As a result of this, Hong Kong has been described as a 'city of protests' (Yuen & Cheng, 2018: 9), and contentious periods in the last two decades have made the city one of the places where most arrests of demonstrators occur (Ortiz et al, 2022: 115). For instance, the protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) in early 2019 advanced into one of the most extensive pro-democracy mobilizations to date (Cheng et al, 2022). Seen as a threat to the region's autonomy and the civil liberties of its citizens, the extradition bill would have allowed individuals suspected of crimes to be extradited to China, effectively

targeting and surpassing Hong Kong's judicial system (Zhang & Gu, 2022). Since 2019, protesters have called for greater democracy and the protection of civil liberties, as well as for an independent inquiry into police brutality (Cheng et al, 2022). The protests were met with heavy-handed police response, further fueling public anger and discontent, manifested through a radicalization of protest tactics. Although peaceful strategies were employed, tactics such as vandalizing government buildings and throwing of Molotov cocktails were adopted (Tang, 2022). The Chinese government sought to stifle dissent in the region by imposing the NSL in 2020, shutting down the possibility of openly resisting the government (Chopra & Pils, 2022). Contentious politics has therefore become a major feature of the political landscape in Hong Kong, although, in the post-NSL era, the future of contention has been questioned (Cheng et al, 2022).

2.3   Hong Kong's Yellow Economic Circle

The 'Yellow[6] Economic Circle' originated in the 2019 anti-ELAB protests and gained traction following the introduction of the NSL in 2020 (Poon & Tse, 2022). The movement emerged as a resistance to the government's attempts to suppress the pro-democracy camp, where it sought to provide political opportunities to the pro-democracy group (Li & Whitworth, 2022). The YEC developed as a strategy in which individuals and businesses that were sympathetic to the pro-democracy movement supported each other while excluding so-called 'blue businesses', which were politically aligned with the government and police, or had ties to the mainland (Chan & Pun, 2020). The idea was hence to reward the yellow shops by consuming and promoting them through 'buycotting', and punish blue shops by boycotting these (Copeland, 2014). Another category where neutral shops were labeled 'green' was later established, which were neither actively buy- nor boycotted (Pao, 2019). The circle gained significance in 2019 when shopkeepers provided shelter, resources, and financial support for those impacted by their

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[6] The color yellow has been linked to the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong since the 2014 Umbrella Movement, where yellow was used as a symbol as it was an effective contrast to China's 'official' red color (Lou & Jaworski, 2016).

engagement in the protests (Chan & Pun, 2020). From then, it developed into a network where individuals used their purchasing power to support the shops which were committed to the larger pro-democracy movement (Li & Whitworth, 2022). Through this, it became a means of targeting the deep-rooted government-business ties in Hong Kong's political system and resistance by boycotting products and shops with linkages to the mainland (Chan, 2022). After the introduction of the Beijing-imposed NSL in Hong Kong, much of the 'open' resistance against the 'mainlandization'[7] of the region ceased due to widespread fear of prosecution (AFP, 2020; Zhang & Gu, 2022). However, the YEC persisted and has since evolved into a broader movement where individuals are self-labeled as light yellow, yellow, and dark yellow, representing different levels of engagement, but also different levels of acceptance towards protest behaviors. Those who are labeled dark yellow tend to be more radical and accept the use of violent acts, while those labeled as light yellow are more moderate in their engagement (Tang, Hung & Ho, 2022; Zhang & Gu, 2022). Across all levels of engagement, the principles of 'being yellow' are well-established as a way of life (Chan, 2022).

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[7] The mainland-driven political-economic convergence between Hong Kong and China (Lo, 2008: 42).

3   Previous Research

This chapter will detail what is already known about democratic mobilization, thereafter narrowing in on Hong Kong. It will map some of the current debates on the topic and draw attention to the impacts of contentious politics in Hong Kong.

3.1   Civil mobilization in authoritarian contexts

The study of contentious politics in relation to mobilization against democratic backsliding[8] is a well-covered topic in the existing scholarship, although little attention is directed to the mechanisms which drive mobilization in societies with hybrid regimes (Adams, Forrat, & Medow, 2022). In authoritarian contexts, civil mobilization is typically suppressed as freedom of expression, assembly, and censorship of media are under restrictions of the ruling authorities (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Despite this, contentious politics are emerging in these contexts, where non-violent mobilization through underground networks and online platforms is becoming increasingly common (Gibril, 2018). Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) examined non-violent civil resistance in Southeast Asia and found that campaigns with a culture of non-violence had a larger success rate than those that used force. The reason for this is, according to the authors, that non-violent resistance tends to be more inclusive as the commitment barriers for participation are lower, and it is less likely to provoke a violent response from the regime. Two effective strategies utilized by pro-democracy movements to further their agenda are thus; broader participation from different segments of society; and avoidance of further government reactions (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). In a similar manner, Gamboa (2022: 22) proposed that non-violent mobilization is essential to create a moral force, as anti-authoritarian contention must operate within a sphere that actively considers the risks of said contention with the possible pay-offs. Gamboa (2022: 23- 24) argued that movements with moderate goals are more likely to bring the movement success, as it shapes the contention to

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[8] This thesis understands democratic backsliding as "[...] the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016: 5).

play out in a safer environment for its participants, seeing how anti-authoritarian dissent is often is met with severe punishments, rendering contentious actions high-risk activities for those engaging in them. This was further argued by Koesel and Bunce (2013), who suggested that the adaptability of contentious politics to comply with societal conditions renders it a powerful mechanism to advocate for social and political change in oppressive contexts.

Pinckney (2020: 252) implied that civil resistance can be an effective tool for democratization processes, but that in order for a movement to yield a successful result, some factors are paramount. Looking at the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the civil rights movement in the United States of America (U.S.), they argued that successful movements could not rely on street protests, but must use other tactics in order for the movement, and its political agenda, to progress (Pinckney, 2020: 252). Similarly, Schock (2005: 27) stressed the importance of strategic planning and coalition-building in movements promoting democratic change, as well as a need for non-violent strategies in order to create a moral force to undermine the legitimacy of the regime, which in turn will mobilize broad-based participation. Looking at four cases of anti-authoritarian contention in the Middle East, Bishara (2021) similarly found that movements which hold a generative power to shape and reshape the political landscape by creating new networks, alliances, and discourses are more likely to be sustained than movements which are more static. They pointed to the importance of understanding how protest activities are organized over space and time, and how this can influence the dynamics and sustainability of protests. This is particularly pertinent for movements that are extended over multiple sites, which are argued to hold the largest generative power and effects as they are more likely to engulf the whole community and create a collective memory of resistance (Bishara, 2021).

3.1.1 The digital shift in mobilization

In their article on democratization and anti-authoritarianism Kulakevich and Kubik (2022) found that in social movements in Belarus and Poland, the use of

new media[9] is playing an increasingly important role in generating power. Not only is new media prominent in mobilization processes and their effectiveness, but also for the facilitation of sustained engagement and understanding of other actors within the movement. In the examined cases, the authors found that new media furthered the dissemination of anti-regime visions of national identity as it allowed individuals to create their own symbols which then were dispersed through said media. Similarly, Beer, Bartkowksi, and Constantine (2021) argued that the emergence of new media has allowed civil resistance tactics to develop and become more widespread. This has led to a continuous occurrence of resistance in several societies and contexts, which indeed has allowed movements to reinvent themselves to accommodate the shifting conditions of resistance in the 21st century (Beer, Bartkowksi, & Constantine, 2021).

Anderson's (2021) study delves into the correlation between information communications technology and protest mobilization in non-democratic settings. They found that new media not only strengthened the mobilizers in terms of communication and coordination but also increased the scope of the mobilization itself. New media can thus revolutionize social movements as it allows them to be shaped by the dynamics of contention, as well as create political associations outside of collective action (Anderson, 2021). Reichert (2021) argued that the use of new media could render a positive impact on individuals' contentious behaviors, but this correlation is most common among social actors who are engaged in both online and offline contention. The innate quality of social networks to adapt to changing repertoires in society has allowed new media to be a complementary strategy to collective action rather than a replacement (Reichert, 2021). Graziano and Forno (2012) shared similar notions, arguing that the use of the Internet facilitates new forms of political participation and engagement, particularly in settings where movements are increasingly decentralized. The authors highlighted political consumerism as a new form of political participation which is notably facilitated through new media (Graziano & Forno, 2012). Thus,

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[9] The use of 'new media' in this thesis refers to "[...] a wide variety of web-related communication technologies, such as blogs, wikis, online social networking, virtual worlds, and other social media forms" (Friedman & Friedman, 2008: 1).

the use of new media has proven to be increasingly important for contentious movements globally.

3.1.2 Contention through political consumerism

Political consumerism is defined as *"[...] the active consumer choice or avoidance of producers, products and services based on ethical and political considerations"* (Gundelach, 2020: 310). It can be used by individuals to achieve political goals and can be seen as democratic means of participation which often occurs in complement to larger political mobilizations (Gundelach, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013: 38). Echegaray (2015) and Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) situated political consumerism in a sphere of lessened democratic freedoms by suggesting that political consumerism has become an important form of political participation in authoritarian spaces. Inquiring how individuals in Latin America use their purchasing power to express their political and social values, Echegeray (2015) argued that political consumerism has become a strong complement to traditional forms of participation. This was echoed by Baek (2010), whose study on political consumerism in the U.S. examines the characteristics and behaviors of people engaged in it. Finding that consumers are driven by political values and self-interest, the author argued that political ideology is the main driver behind consumption choices.

Klintman (2006) suggested that political consumerism can be regarded as both a means to an end, but also an end in itself, seeing how it can be used as a way of achieving political goals, but also by individuals seeking to express their political identity. The last one is especially pertinent in societies where other means of expressing political identity have been restricted. The author further suggested that political consumerism as a means of contention has limitations, citing reinforcement of capitalist, neoliberal ideas which can remove focus from other political and societal issues (Klintman, 2006). Gundelach (2020) acknowledged that while political consumerism has the potential to be a more inclusive participatory system, it can hinder the participation of economically marginalized groups. By analyzing social media posts and stakeholder interviews,

Gundelach (2020) found that failure to acknowledge class-based purchasing power creates an obstacle for movements, which Ho and Chen (2021) argued is inevitable in politicized capitalism.

3.2   Contentious politics in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has been dubbed a 'city of protests' (Yuen & Cheng, 2018: 9), which contradicts the perception of Hong Kong citizens being politically apathetic. Degoyler and Scott (1996) challenged this notion by suggesting that political participation in Hong Kong has been expressed through less traditional, western, means due to its unique historical, cultural, and political context. Hongkongers' political participation is here argued to be expressed through informal channels such as grassroots community organizations and local leadership, which in turn has informed their contentious activities. Ma (2009: 61) argued that in order to understand contemporary political engagement and contention in Hong Kong, one must understand its unique civil society, characterized by a strong tradition of voluntary association and civil engagement. After the 1997 handover, the erosion of civil liberties shaped the engagement into the realm of contention. Ma argued that this made social movements in Hong Kong more prone to adapt to the changing relationship between the state and society, as strategies such as resistance grew (Ma, 2009: 46). Hui (2014), however, suggested that it is not always actions of other actors that drive contention in Hong Kong, arguing that the 2014 Umbrella Movement[10] was rooted in stalemate in political reform. Further, the author suggested that the rise of contentious politics in Hong Kong has had significant consequences as periods of contention have exposed deep divisions and tensions, eroding public trust in governmental institutions (Hui, 2014: 223).

Lee and Chan (2016) examined the political culture during the Umbrella Movement and found that it was grounded in the view that the Hong Kong

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[10] The Umbrella Movement started in 2014 as a call for greater democracy through universal suffrage, which was promised by the Basic Law. The name comes from protestors using yellow umbrellas as shields against police tear gas during mass-mobilizations (Veg, 2020: 196-198).

government was beholden to the interest of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)[11] over that of the Hong Kong population. Moreover, they found that engagement in the movement was characterized by a distinctive political culture emphasizing non-violence, civil disobedience, and inclusiveness. This led the movement to have its roots in a strong sense of community and solidarity, which aided the sustainability of activism. Cheng (2016) examined the diffusion of political activism in Hong Kong and found that the hybrid regime of authoritarianism and democratic governance has created a complex political environment in which different forms of political activism can emerge and interact. In relation to the 2014 movement, Cheng (2016) found that it brought together activists from different social and political backgrounds, which facilitated the development of new forms of collective action and mobilization. They further argued that social media played a large role in facilitating post-2014 protests (Cheng, 2016).

Cheng et al (2022) examined the 2019 anti-ELAB protests and similarly found that its bottom-up, decentralized grounding diffused the movement, which in turn allowed it to grow as it encompassed a wider range of discourses, such as political freedom, autonomy, and democracy. In an examination of tactics used during the 2019 protests, Tang (2022) found that the decentralized strategy of the movement led to disparate perceptions of the movement's efficiency in preventing further Chinese encroachment. The author argued that it was this that led to the use of violent tactics and not a radicalization of individuals engaged. However, instead of progressing the movement and its diverse demands, the violent tactics deterred people from further engaging and prompted the enactment of the NSL (Tang, 2022).

3.3 Post-NSL mobilization in Hong Kong

Scholarship conceptualizing post-NSL contention in Hong Kong has been largely dominated by three themes; political participation; resistance-based action (mobilization); and identity politics. Moreover, these three are often highly

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[11] A political party in China which since 1949 has been in control of the country's government (Britannica, 2023).

interconnected- particularly under the umbrella of political consumerism (as exemplified by Gundelach, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013: 12, 19). Further illustrated by Chan (2022) was the notion of political consumerism as a form of contentious politics connected to individual agency, seeing how individuals can use their purchasing power to reach political means. Chan (2022) argued that collective agency and activism are still dominant, and given the inherent unified effort that political consumerism yields, it can be motivated by a collective identity, and that these are mutually reinforcing. Chan (2022) further suggested that political consumerism can be a driving force in sustaining political participation in the resistance movement as long as a collective identity is preserved. Tang, Hung, and Ho (2022) proposed that in the post-colonial political vacuum of Hong Kong, it is neither Chinese ideology nor colonial legacy that shapes the collective political identity, but rather cultural roots and cultural identity. This was further endorsed by Chan & Ng (2020) who suggested that localism, and the structure of peripheral nationalism it is rooted in, is the main driving force within contemporary contention in Hong Kong. Wong, Kwong, and Chan (2021) pointed to heightened mobilizations in relation to the 1997 handover and during the 2019 anti-ELAB movement, as well as the passing of the NSL, which were all periods in which the sub-national was targeted. The strengthening of the pro-democracy movement during these times was then driven by an ambition to make Hong Kong more resilient and autonomous by safeguarding the cultural and political identity of Hongkongers (Wong, Kwong, & Chan, 2021).

Further, scholarship on contemporary contention in Hong Kong emphasized the role of digital activism as a driving force for mobilization (Li & Whitworth, 2022), which can be linked to anti-authoritarian contention in general. Online mobilization is well-established in Hong Kong as exemplified by the 'blossom everywhere'[12] strategy where social media, in particular, was used to mobilize protests (Ting, 2020). The post-NSL shift towards more covert

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[12] The strategy of 'blossom everywhere' relates to a system where multiple protests took place at the same time around the city to divert the police forces in 2019. The use of 'blossom' is well established in the pro-democracy movement and alludes to democracy 'flowering' everywhere (Ting, 2022).

mobilization through political consumerism proved to be a smooth transition due to this deep-seated employment of new media strategies (Ho & Chen, 2021). This was stressed by Lai and Sing (2020), Li and Whitworth (2022), Lee and Fong (2021), and Poon and Tse (2022), which all referred to the importance of new media in sustaining, and to some extent progressing, contention in Hong Kong. Lee and Fong (2021) further suggested that organization through new media has diminished the need for physical mobilization, making it more sustainable in relation to the NSL while also making the need for a central authority less essential. This was highlighted by Ting (2020) as a strong aspect of contemporary contention, arguing that the horizontal structure of mobilization grants greater agency seeing how it allows for multiple avenues to access and contribute to the movement. By being less fixed and more organic, contention in Hong Kong might not yield a quantifiable, structural impact but will allow for a greater focus on reproducing a collective identity (Lai & Sing, 2020; Ting, 2020).

Chan (2022), Chan and Ng (2020), and Tang & Cheng (2020) all argued that the lack of centralized strategizing has allowed contention to adjust and adapt to the political development in Hong Kong. Chung (2020) implied that a deepening of everyday politicization has ensured that the YEC remains accessible and relevant for people seeking political participation. Chan (2020) argued that this points to the sustainability of contentious politics in Hong Kong, as individuals even after the passing of the NSL have been successful in finding methods and means to express their political views. As Hongkongers construct a shared political identity that is reinforced, and in turn reinforces, political consumerism, Chan further argued that the YEC is a sustainable means of resistance in Hong Kong's political landscape (Chan, 2020).

4   Theoretical framework

As the aim of this study is to understand why individuals engage in contentious activities, the theoretical framework will be rooted in notions of agency. In order to effectively account for individuals' political participation in the analysis, theoretical frames derived from Yuen and Cheng's (2018) movement field approach will be utilized.

4.1   Approaches in contentious politics

Scholarship on contention commonly follows the sociological structural-functionalist approach, where it positions individuals' means of political participation in relation to established socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions (Yuen & Cheng, 2018) (as exemplified by Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2022). Thus, the research agenda driven by this approach investigates how social equilibrium is established and reinforced rather than exploring transformations in societies (Burawoy, 2005; Goldstone, 1980). In this sense, citizen participation is driven by practical notions and emphasizes the perception of individuals being politically apathetic, as it centers on assumptions that disciplines such as sociology and politics are inherently contradicting (Burawoy, 2005; Lau & Liu, 1984: 13-14). In accordance with the structural-functionalist notion, the idea of Hong Kong as a political society and the emergence of citizens as political actors were driven by the handover in 1997 (Degolyer & Scott, 1996). This essentializes the driving forces behind citizens' mode of political participation into forms of political subjectivities motivated by systemic stress and generalizes their political behaviors in relation to this structure (Goldstone, 1980; Yuen & Cheng, 2018). Consequently, it separates individuals from their agency (Lee & Chan, 2008). Scholarship within this approach is moving towards an agenda of political agency but is grounded in a belief that any subjectivities are shaped by existing societal structures and conditions (see Della Porta, 2015; McAdam, Tilly, & Tarrow, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1991). In light of this perception, the complexity of citizens'

political agency is depreciated as it disregards the influence episodes of contention have on individuals (Yuen & Cheng, 2018).

Building on this, the neo-institutionalist approach equips academics with the tools to examine relationships between institutions and actors and contends that contention may be explained by examining the political framework and practices that these operate within (Hall & Taylor, 1996). The structures of political opportunity are identified as the aim is to analyze how these give rise to or absorb dissent (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). Neo-institutionalist research focuses on the institutional transformation process and contends that political stability is a function of how effectively a government employs its politics in connection to various actors (King, 1975). Moreover, this approach suggests that political contention in Hong Kong was driven by the government crisis following the 1997 handover, and as the institutional structures weakened and started to lose legitimacy, they gave rise to political opportunities that led to popular contention (Sing, 2006). As crises of governance give rise to political opportunities, mobilization functions as a societal reflex to the crises, with the goal to address said institutional problems (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). This approach, however, rejects the crucial role of political actors in creating political opportunities, which is imperative in the emergence of mobilization (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996: 285). As it situates actors within the rational choice theory, it suggests that they only act when a perceived gain is larger than the payoff (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Scharpf, 1989). Further, the neo-institutionalist approach downplays the significance of chance events and solitary occurrences in sparking mobilization, especially when it comes to (a lack of) political opportunities (Snow & Moss, 2014). These approaches then fall short of explaining why individuals participate in collective action where the potential payoff does not balance the risks of their engagement (Scott, 2000).

4.2   The importance of agency

In order to allow for an agency-driven examination of contention, it is essential to move away from the structural bias presented in previous approaches. This thesis understands agency as "[...] the capacity to act upon situations. Agency is a property of 'actors', defined as entities that are able to formulate and implement decisions. The term 'actor', so understood, denotes [...] individual people" (Lewis, 2002: 17). This, in turn, allows individuals to be viewed as agents who "[...] can anticipate, they can react to shocks and they can transform their behavior" (Bristow & Healy, 2014: 929). By focusing on the role of political actors, one can highlight the role of collective and individual agency in mobilization processes (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). With less attention given to the structural and institutional conditions for mobilization, scrutiny is instead put on identifying the causal mechanisms which drive the mobilization of social contention, as well as pointing to the dynamic nature of contention (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996: 280). The importance of agency is emphasized in the 'dynamics of contention' approach, which looks at dynamic strains, attributes threats (of further repression) and opportunities to political actors, and analyzes mobilization structures within the political process model (McAdam, Tilly, & Tarrow, 2001: 6, 43).

This approach has previously been utilized in the framing of contentious politics in Hong Kong, where Lee and Chan (2016) emphasized the dynamic relation between factors and actors, as well as the role of self-mobilization in different protest movements. Similarly, Ku (2001) pointed to a connection between institutional factors and civil mobilization by looking at how the former has helped frame and drive the latter by providing mechanisms for sustained contention. Albeit more in-depth and agency-focused in explaining the processes around mobilization, the dynamic of contention approach still demonstrates a bias toward certain dimensions, such as the cognitive and strategic, and overlooks others, such as the emotional, expressive, and cultural (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). It frames individuals as political actors who are expected to react to certain cognitive cues but does not elicit an analysis as to *why* they react in certain

manners. Categorizing emotions as cultural accomplishments rather than psychological responses allows scholars to analyze them as mechanisms driving social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2004: 416). Agency, in this sense, becomes wholly related to structures and reinforces the structural bias in the political process (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). The focus on causal mechanisms also overlooks different lateral dimensions of contention. These include dimensions without measurable causal impact, such as identity, space, culture, and religion. The sustainability of the mobilization is in this case attributed to its physical dissemination, which certainly is a legitimate explanation, but one that overlooks the role of space in shaping collective identities which in turn drives the mobilization processes forward. These interactions are crucial for understanding how actors engaging in contentious politics shape new alignments and identities (McAdam, Tilly, & Tarrow, 2001: 194). The focus on physical mobilization neglects less apparent means of contention which are more visible in everyday life, such as identity politics and community activism (Diani, 2003: 14; Zurcher & Snow, 1981: 462). These forms of contention are more challenging to detect, making it difficult to measure any potential causal relationships between these and mass-mobilization. Instead, it shapes the social and cultural environment in which mobilization takes place (Yuen & Cheng, 2018).

4.3   The movement field approach

Drawing on the strengths of the previous approaches, Yuen and Cheng (2018) sought to calibrate a theoretical framework for analyzing contentious politics in unique spaces, such as Hong Kong. The framework, called 'the movement field', balances approaches focusing on structures and agency to be more explanatory and interpretive. The movement field shifts away from the separation of agency and structure and conceives contentious action as the exchange between the two. It allows researchers to look at political actors and how they make use of structural, or in this case, political openings, as well as how their respective agencies are framed by the structures (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). Conceptualized in

Bourdieu's notion of 'field' as a 'field of forces' (Bourdieu, 2005: 30), it looks at how agents operate in relation to structures and how the position they chose in the field either conserves or transforms said structure (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). Fields are arenas of social life in which actors compete over the distribution of capital, often in the form of services, knowledge, or status, as well as the power to define it as such. Individuals are then constrained by the governing rules of the field but also driven by their embedded dispositions, which determine their position in the field relative to other people (Bourdieu, 2005: 30).

Yuen and Cheng (2018) argued that by looking at the field, one can determine that individuals' actions and behavior incorporate both agency and structure, seeing how their behavior is driven by free will, but also influenced by latent forces in the field. When these individual dispositions are in line with the actions of the field, they are most likely auxiliary in conserving the field. However, when discrepancies occur conflicts might arise, and the field is likely to transform to regain balance. In this sense, contentious politics operates much like a field, as it consists of actors who operate by specific rules and norms and who interact with each other to compete for capital surrounding social and political issues. In order to transform the field to their own advantage, they strategize with respect to existing threats to their agency and opportunities to create mobilizing structures to make contentious claims. Moreover, the movement field approach allows for a more subtle conceptualization of social change, as it does not necessarily suggest a policy-, or institutional change. Another important characteristic is that it can include changes in individual and collective dispositions that are structuring the field and driving actors' future behavior without changing the rules and norms. These changes can also occur through the expansion of the field to new spaces or new practices of contention, which creates further opportunities for transformation. These conceptual tools make the movement field a more suitable approach for in-depth, agency-driven bottom-up inquiries into contentious politics. The framework builds on the neo-institutionalist-, structural-functionalist-, and dynamics of contention approaches to fully account for how state and non-state actors interact in regard to

issues of mobilization for activism, adopt various contentious practices, and transcend established boundaries of contention.

4.4 The movement field approach in practice

As the movement field approach explores contentious politics beyond the conventional lens, it allows for a deeper dive into socio-political changes and continuities. Yuen and Cheng (2018) identified three heuristic dimensions of the movement field to operate as possible levers of analysis. These three dimensions will be utilized in this thesis and are presented below.

4.4.1 Discourses of contention

Yuen and Cheng (2018) suggest that looking at the discursive frames, resources, and ideas which actors utilize in making contentious claims about other actors allows analysis beyond popular contention based on the issues which they emerge from. These issues create spaces for political opportunities for actors and provide them with frames to mobilize contentious actions, and the analytical focus is on how these issues trigger contention. However, analytical focus is rarely shed on *why* those issues are the driving forces and how they shape contentious politics. By looking at the discourse, it can inform why certain issues, for instance the ELAB, provide political opportunities and frames to create mass-mobilization. This will allow for an examination into how the discourse evolved throughout these issues, in particular how certain perspectives were incorporated and emphasized or less emphasized at different stages. It can uncover a better awareness of the process of cultural reproduction and how it gives rise to an alternative understanding of a society and its actors, which is central in explaining why issues lead to contention and why contentious politics evolve in a certain direction (Yuen & Cheng, 2018).

4.4.2   Spaces of contention

Referring to the physical or virtual place where contentious politics occur and where they can be observed, spaces of contention can explain how contentious politics are shaped by spaces, as well as how they in turn shape spaces. As contemporary research is focused on contentious spaces which contain activism separate from political institutions, this dimension seeks to move the interest of analysis beyond the physical sites for mobilization (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). This will make it possible to concentrate on how established spaces can be influenced by contested activities and give them meaning. As a result, spaces are no longer regarded as static but can be recreated in connection with other actors, allowing for the enlargement or contraction of boundaries (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). The significance of contested spaces as more than just venues for action emphasizes how crucial they are for creating meaning, forming collective identities, and shattering fixed social and political boundaries (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Within this framework, it is also possible to examine contentious spaces beyond physical locations, as contention has spread to everyday spaces where new media is a pertinent example. The use of interactive platforms for exchanging and circulating ideas and establishing communities makes it possible to engage in contentious politics online when offline mobilization is constrained. In the last two decades, connective action has proven to be a highly integrated system when collective action is problematized (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). To better understand how this interaction affected the evolving field of contentious politics, the interaction and connectedness between these are highlighted (Yuen & Cheng, 2018).

4.4.3   Practices of contention

Yuen and Cheng (2018) view practices as the acts or forms of contention through which actors make claims about others. Rallies and protests are historically viewed as the main form of practice and are seen as 'repertoires' in this area. The repertoires are shaped, to some extent, by the space in which the contention occurs but also by the underlying social context. When practices of contention

deviate from the often-used repertoires, it is important to look at *why* contention manifests in other ways. Employing a more general approach to practices, it sheds light on the embedded and complex meanings of contentious acts on both collective and individual levels. Practices can be performative or expressive; they are not always deliberate and strategic ways of expressing claims. This suggests that even though acts do not bring about tangible movement successes, they may indeed have transformative effects on actors and their dispositions which in turn can alter the structure of the field in subtle or latent ways. This also suggests that practices do not need to be collectively organized, but also personalized and individualistic- a strain of contentious practices which have become more frequent in the time of new media. By looking at contentious practices through this lens, it allows the discovery of the embedded meaning behind the practices as well as understanding how new practices are challenging traditional means of claims-making (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). This will support the analysis of subtle changes in an individual's political agency.

5   Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and the methodological choices made in the thesis. Here, the data collection process and method for data analysis will be presented, along with a reflection on ethical considerations and recognition of the limitations of the study.

5.1   Research design

This study focuses on the lived experience and narratives of individuals engaged in the YEC in Hong Kong and will use a qualitative single case study design which allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific, complex phenomenon at hand (Mason, 2018: 233). As the unit of analysis is limited to the narratives of people engaged in the YEC, the customary idiographic approach of a case study makes it more suitable for the purpose of this thesis compared to other research designs (Bryman, 2016: 69-70). This design allows for a systemic application of personal narratives and experiences, which aids in describing it instead of solely confirming the case (Baškarada, 2014). The case study research design requires that the research is conducted through a systematic and intentional process, which suggests that the data collection and analysis should be processed through a theoretical grounding, linking the whole process together as they inform each other. This process allows the research to yield a result that is more grounded and nuanced (Yin, 2009: 21).

5.2   Research method and data

Following the single case study research design, the study utilizes qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The data was collected through interviews, building on the notion that the method allows for a more in-depth understanding of the topic, in comparison with results from for instance surveys. Qualitative data places emphasis on lived experiences (Linabary & Hamel, 2017), and by working with this data, it allows researchers to locate meanings to events,

structures, and processes occurring in the social world around these experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 8).

5.2.1 Semi-structured interviews and sampling

The data was collected using interviews with open-ended questions that were related to the aim of the research. The interviews were semi-structured as it allowed the research to be theoretically and thematically structured while permitting an open and informal setting for the interviews (Mason, 2018: 172). An interview guide (see appendix A for interview guide) was prepared ahead of the interviews using themes drawn from the theoretical framework, previous literature, informal discussions and pilot interviews with two informants, and debates in online publications and social media. These themes relate to how those engaged in the YEC view contentious politics in Hong Kong and the political situation after the introduction of the NSL. Additional themes were introduced after the initial interviews when the participant's perspectives were analyzed. The interview guide was shared with two informants ahead of the data-collecting process to ensure that the questions were culturally sensitive. During the interviews, the guide worked as a prompt and was not followed strictly to maintain an active and informal interview setting so as to encourage the respondent's constructive storytelling (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 40).

Since the purpose of the interviews was to understand the central phenomenon of the study, a purposive sampling process was necessary (Creswell, 2015: 76). As the research is focused on a specific group and not the population at large in Hong Kong, the sample criteria was based on an active and sustained engagement in the YEC (Stewart-Withers et al, 2014: 61). Based on the initial sampling, the sample was expanded and complemented using the snowball approach where initial interviewees provided contact with acquaintances that were also engaged in the movement (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 110). The sampling process ended once the data reached theoretical saturation, as input from further participants would not add substantially to the development of themes or codes (Creswell, 2015: 77).

The data was collected through ten interviews with individuals situated in Hong Kong partaking in the YEC. In order to disclose any potential limitations with the sample, a list of participants is presented in appendix B. Here, different attributes of the interviewees, with two prominent attributes; geographical identity; and movement identity, are listed. The intention behind this disclosure is to give readers a further understanding of individual grounding in the narratives provided by the interviewees (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 157). The movement identity, which 'shade of yellow' the participants were identifying as, is disclosed to highlight the participant's variation of engagement. All information included in the list of participants has been approved by the interviewees prior to disclosure. Ethical considerations concerning the interviews are brought up in sections 5.5 and 5.5.1.

The participants were given the opportunity to conduct the interview in person at a safe place and a convenient time, or online through a medium they would prefer. Eight of the interviews were conducted in person in Hong Kong in March of 2023, and two were conducted online in March and April of 2023. The virtual interviews were conducted as the interviewees cited their preference for online mediums to maintain their privacy and limit the potential of the interview being overheard. Before the interviews commenced, the interviewees were asked for consent to use their responses in the research, as well as consent for audio recording the interviews on the premise that they were deleted once transcriptions had been made. The interviews spanned between 45 minutes and 2 hours and were transcribed using a constructive and interpretive approach (Given, 2008: 883). Initial transcription occurred in the field to allow the researcher to grasp overarching themes, initiate the data analysis and seek saturation of the sample. Once the process was concluded, an additional round of transcription ensued, where the initial transcriptions were reviewed, corrected, and compared to the field notes (Poland, 2008: 885). The process of transcribing was done in a reflexive manner which allowed for the erasure of any ambiguities (Poland, 2008: 885).

5.3   Data analysis

In order to structurally analyze the data, a thematic analysis was employed to interpret common and recurring themes in the collected data. The interviews were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020: 8) model of qualitative data analysis. Data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verifying are seen as three interwoven streams that together when the process of data collection is concluded, make up the data analysis (*see figure 1 below)*. Using this model, the streams of data analysis and data collection occur concurrently, making a cyclical, interactive process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 10). Using this model allowed the data analysis to be continuous and interactive.

The data analysis began in the field, and subsequently with the process of collecting the data. This was done to organize general themes based on the recordings and field notes to initiate the process of condensing the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 10). The adoption of a reflexive approach to the process, where the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and analysis aided in the processing of the data and also helped sharpen the focus of the fieldwork (O'Reilly, 2009a: 14). Once the data-collecting process was done, the interviews and field notes were manually transcribed using constructive and interpretive methods (Given, 2008: 883), and the transcriptions were then analyzed as to identify and interpret common themes, using jottings to visualize these reflections (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 86; O'Reilly, 2009a: 16). In the next stage, the first cycle coding commenced using the software NVivo, where the data was categorized according to these themes to cluster the findings with similar units, in order to condense the units for further analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 63). This was followed by a second cycle of coding, in which the theoretical framework was applied, and the initial codes where assigned under main codes, or dimensions, labeled 'discourses', 'spaces', and 'practices' as drawn from the framework. An additional code labeled 'agency' was included. The coding scheme was further revised using themes derived from previous literature, the theoretical framework, and from the initial analysis of the

transcripts (see appendix C for a visualization of the coding scheme) (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 79). This allowed the process to be both inductive, where codes where developed directly from the data, and deductive, where codes where derived from the theoretical framework (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The final round of coding further condensed the data, making it possible to draw conclusions by noticing recurring and relevant patterns and preparing the data for display in the data analysis chapter (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 275-276). The data is mainly displayed as quotes, which are principally unedited so as not to lose the essence of the quote. The only editing was to exclude extraneous sounds in the displaying of the data.
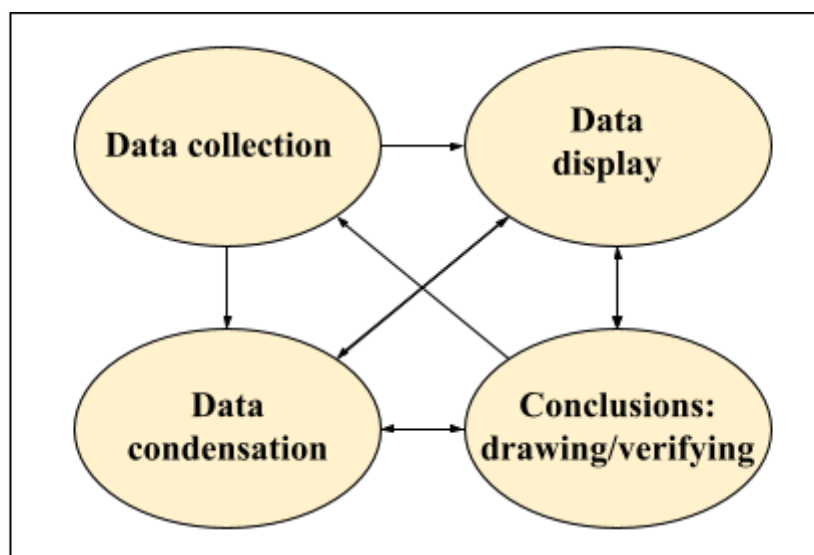
Figure 1: Components of Qualitative Data Analysis: Interactive Model *(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 10).*

5.4   Limitations

For the sake of transparency and legitimacy, it is important to note the limitations and delimitations of this thesis. The researchers limited knowledge of the local language is a definite disadvantage to the research process. However, although Cantonese is the predominantly spoken language in Hong Kong, English is one of the official languages and is taught from grade one of primary school (Lau, 2020). By spending six months on location in Hong Kong, the researcher amassed an

understanding of key phrases, vocabulary, and cultural norms, further lessening issues surrounding the language barrier. This made the potential language barrier surmountable during the interviews, but when needed, an informant helped decode any confusions that arose during the process of transcribing (McLennan, Storey, & Leslie, 2014: 156). Most of the material on the YEC is written using traditional Chinese characters, which the researcher does not read. This has resulted in an organic delimitation of the thesis, as most of this material is excluded from the research. This delimitation could, in turn, limit the scope of the thesis, but due to the chosen research method, this issue is not believed to affect the results of this thesis (Gentles et al, 2016).

Another limitation of the study is the accessibility of interviewees. Given the complex political context of this case, the individual's willingness to speak about the issue with a foreign researcher might be limited. This created difficulties in reaching participants, seeing how an open call for interview participants via for instance social media could create discomfort around participating. This limitation was counteracted through the use of informants and snowball sampling to reach participants (Merkens, 2004: 166). Snowball sampling as a technique comes with its own limitations such as selection bias, seeing how it depends on referral to the initial participants' contacts. This can lead to distorted research, as a variety of perspectives and beliefs are less likely (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019: 4-5). Since the thesis is not seeking generalization or external validity, this limitation can be considered surmountable (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019: 4). This leads to the next limitation, inherent in qualitative research- generalizability. Given the smaller number of participants, the research lacks the ability to generalize the results to other cases and populations. However, given the exploratory and context-specific design of this thesis, the purpose is not to draw general or comprehensive conclusions, but to understand the phenomenon at hand in greater detail (Stewart-Withers et al, 2014: 77).

5.5   Ethical considerations

As this study is situated in a politically sensitive realm, which can be exemplified by the NSL's targeting of freedom of speech (Maizland, 2022) there is an inherent need for the research to be grounded in ethical principles. One of the main issues to discuss is the process of collecting data, where the anonymity and safety of the interviewees are of utmost importance.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic at hand, two local informants have aided the research, particularly before and throughout the data-collecting process. The informants are contacts the researcher established while living in Hong Kong for six months in 2022. The informants are members of the target populations (Kumar, 1989: 8) and are active in the political realm in Hong Kong. The informants have aided the thesis by being consciously reflexive about the context and culture in which the research takes place, informing the thesis with local knowledge that could have otherwise been overlooked or undiscovered (O'Reilly, 2009b: 133-134). The informants have also served as interpreters when needed and helped the process by ensuring that the interview guide is culturally sensitive (McLennan, Storey, & Leslie, 2014: 152). The possible issues with utilizing informants are the potential biases within their accounts, as well as issues with representation (Kumar, 1989: 2-3). These were bridged through reflection and triangulation of any information provided (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014: 171). Further, the informants were provided with the same ethical considerations as the interviewees.

There is also an inherent power dynamic to be acknowledged in relation to interviews. As a result, emphasis was placed on ensuring that the interviewees were comfortable by having informal, light-hearted conversations before and after the interview. Moreover, the interviewees were informed that they held the power to disclose as much and little as they wanted during the interview to ensure that they were comfortable throughout the whole process (Stewart-Withers et al, 2014: 62). In relation to the virtual interviews Roberts, Pavlakis, & Richards' (2021) four steps of ethical interviewing were utilized, where the focus is shed on

informed consent, accessibility, considerations of potential risks and timeliness of the research. Beyond this, the face-to-face interviews and virtual interviews were conducted through uniform processes.

5.5.1 Measures to ensure participants' anonymity

The sensitivity of the topic at hand, given the widely interpretive manner of the NSL, situates the interviewees in the study in a precarious situation. It was therefore of utmost importance to ensure that the interviewees were informed of the study's aims and potential consequences to their participation in order to make a cognizant choice to participate. In the preparations for the ethnography, these potential risks and harm, as well as the ethics of the study were discussed with the informants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020: 55). The fieldwork was then modified to comply with the information provided. Prior to the interviews, all interviewees were briefed on the nature of the study, the background of the researcher as well as how their participation was expected to contribute (James & Busher, 2016: 14-15). The interviewees were also informed of the measures that were taken to ensure their anonymity and privacy, along with the highly voluntary basis of their participation (James & Busher, 2016: 15). The interviewees were informed on several occasions that they had the right to withdraw their participation during any stage of the process, and were informed that the thesis was to be handed in on May 17, 2023. This was a critical step as it allowed the interviewees to give informed consent prior to their participation (Hewson, 2008: 549). All interviewees were approached using WhatsApp, as the medium's end-to-end encryption benefited the privacy and confidentiality of the participants (WhatsApp, n.d.). WhatsApp was chosen due to its widespread use amongst the demographic in Hong Kong, but the interviewees were informed that the platform for further communication could be changed should they prefer another medium.

All interviewees had to provide verbal consent before the interviews began, as written consent was not effective in ensuring the anonymity and privacy of the individuals. The findings drawn from the interviews are presented without disclosing any information about the informant that is not of inherent importance

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to the thesis. If any information given was possible to trace to the interviewees, it was excluded from the findings during the process of transcribing. All data were treated with confidentiality and stored securely (Scheyvens, Scheyvens, & Murray, 2014: 184-189), and any linking to the participants were made via hand-written field notes that were, alongside the audio recordings, deleted once the process of transcribing was concluded. The handwritten notes were shredded and disposed of in a confidential manner. The interviewees were also given the opportunity to decide whether or not they gave permission for the interview to be audio recorded, which all the interviewees except one approved of. Two participants wished for the interviews to take place virtually, where end-to-end encrypted video calls via WhatsApp were opted for, on the interviewees' insistence. The audio recording of the interviews was agreed upon on the premise of a dictation machine being used. Before the data collection process, an informant suggested the use of a dictation machine for audio recording, as the prospect of interviewees not wanting to be recorded on a smartphone was imminent.

6 Analysis of Findings

The analysis will offer a background into the strategies and challenges expressed by the interviewees of the thesis. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the findings, the analysis will be divided into subsections per the dimensions presented in the theoretical framework.

6.1 Discourses of contention

Yuen and Cheng (2018) argue that by looking at how discourses drive, shape, and develop through contention, we can get a deeper understanding of why certain issues lead to further dissent. By including an analytical lens that focuses on individual agency, it can also uncover a better awareness of the process of cultural reproduction that prompts the movement. For this purpose, an examination into why individuals initially engaged in the YEC and if, or how, this aspiration has changed following the introduction of the NSL was significant to understand *why* their engagement was maintained. A recurring reference amongst a majority of the interviewees explaining their initial engagement in the YEC was democracy, particularly the preservation of civil rights connected to it. One interviewee, who has been engaged in the pro-democracy movement since she was a teenager, exemplified this notion by stating:

> *"[...] I have been engaged politically [in the YEC] because I want Hong Kong to remain democratic. I don't think I would go to rallies or demonstrate if it was not for democracy and so on. Like I wouldn't protest against higher fees on the MTR[13], so I don't think I am a political person" (Interviewee 2).*

Several of the interviewees stressed democracy as their motivation to initially engage in the YEC, although they had limited political engagement outside of the

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[13] Acronym for Mass Transit Railways, a public transport company throughout the whole of Hong Kong. The majority shareholder is the Hong Kong government, with 74.71% of the shares (MTR, 2023).

pro-democracy movement. At the same time, when asked about post-NSL participation, a majority of the interviewees implied that the aspiration for greater democracy was not the purpose of their sustained engagement. This supports previous research (for instance Wong, Kwong & Chan, 2021) that those engaged in the YEC are not expecting the movement to yield any substantial structural reform. One interviewee, who has been engaged in the pro-democracy movement since the 2014 Umbrella uprisings, said:

"I want democracy or at least democracy in the sense that we are allowed to have opinions and voice them. [...] if you would ask me if the movement and the shopping will bring democracy, I would say no. Something else is needed but I think the yellow shops is a way to unify people when we wait for what's gonna happen" (Interviewee 1).

This suggests that although the idea of preserving democratic and civil rights is the main rationale behind his commitment to the YEC, democracy is not necessarily the motive for his sustained engagement. Instead, a recurring discourse in the justification of post-NSL engagement was resistance, in connection to both the Hong Kong and Chinese governments. One interviewee, who identifies as a yellow Hongkonger, explained that she participates in the YEC as a way to resist the mainland's encroachment of Hong Kong, on the grounds that she has *"nothing against China per se, more so the lack of freedom China represents"* (Interviewee 9). She further suggested that even though her engagement is rooted in an ambition to oppose this development, the resistance is inherently grounded in the pro-democracy movement:

"I want Hong Kong to resist, or persist [...]. I mean, I want Hong Kong to be Hong Kong and that is why I have always supported it. Although I'm not supporting it for democracy technically, it is still part of it. Hong Kong should be democratic so if you do it to support Hong Kong, you do it for democratic purposes anyways" (Interviewee 9).

This narrative represents a vast majority of the responses from the sample while also speaking to the importance of agency within contemporary contention. The notion of a culture of democracy being deeply rooted in a local 'Hong Kong identity' suggests that democratic reform is not the main discourse for sustained engagement. Instead, it is a latent feature within a cultural identity that allows for a deeper examination of what role the dimension of cultural, rather than institutional, democracy plays in the reproduction of a Hong Kong identity. Rooted in pragmatism, this notion of a 'democratic culture' suggests that "people of Hong Kong prefer democracy but can tolerate authoritarian rule in exchange for stability and peace" (Lam, 2001: 23). The idea of cultural democracy can be defined as ways of thinking and feeling that go in line with the ideas portrayed in democratic values, with an emphasis on freedom and security (Griffith, Plamenatz, & Pennock, 1956). This also plays into the discourse of resisting influence by conserving Hong Kong's cultural identity. One interviewee highlighted this inherent interrelation by stating:

> *"It is as important as always if we want to keep Hong Kong. So maybe a bit more important after the security law because we can't do many other things to show that we are Hong Kongers. [...]. This is another way of showing support to people that want to keep Hong Kong culture and life" (Interviewee 8).*

The narrative surrounding the importance of solidarity and identity for sustaining their engagement is constant throughout the majority of the interviews, which sets these discourses at the center of the findings.

6.1.1 Solidarity towards a shared identity

Although the YEC is grounded in, and developed through, the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the interview data suggests that solidarity towards other Hong Kong people and a shared identity are the main driving discourses for many individuals to engage in contentious politics. One interviewee, who identifies as a

yellow to dark yellow Hongkonger, explained that his engagement in the YEC stemmed from a wish to help other people:

"I wanted to keep on helping other Hongkongers that needed help, but I didn't know how. When I learned about the yellow shops, I thought it was very smart, like it was such a simple way for me to be involved and at the same time help people [...]" (Interviewee 5).

Another interviewee suggested that her reasons for mobilization also stem from a willingness to help and that her perception of risks versus rewards is not hindering her engagement but drives it:

"I can't be a martyr, because there already is far too many people that are wrongfully charged because of what they believe in. I am not that person and can never be that person, but I do what feels good for me and try to sacrifice some comfortableness in order to do what I can" (Interviewee 2).

The same interviewee initially joined the pro-democracy demonstrations in 2019 as a way to express her political view but disengaged once violence started to occur, seeing how the benefits of engaging were far outweighed by the potential risks. She recognized the YEC as a way to go back to being politically active. At the same time, she stressed the fact that her engagement is moderate as she mainly engages in buycotting, and consequently grounded in her will to support Hongkongers:

"Engagement is not only running in the streets and expressing opinions out loud, but in doing acts such as this [shopping yellow]. Hongkongers supporting Hongkongers sort of" (Interviewee 2).

This suggests that solidarity and democracy are interlinked, while also coinciding with the findings from Ku (2001). It suggests that the region's history of pro-democracy contention is rooted in perceptions of a shared identity. Another

interviewee exemplified this connection by suggesting that Hongkongers are inherently resistant and auxiliary as it is a part of a shared identity:

> *"The [pro-democracy] movement needed support because when it was at its worst in 2019, it did not really help that shops closed down and made the situation worse. Hong Kong is not the type of place where you just close up shop when things get bad, like you keep open and do what you can. So from there, it was quite a natural progression to keep on visiting the shops that also went to the frontline[14] and helped us" (Interviewee 1).*

The nature of the strain of political consumerism that is visible in Hong Kong is suggested to be rooted in the idea of buycotting, which speaks more to the desire to support like-minded individuals and shops. The sense of 'togetherness' is a large driving force for sustained engagement, and here it becomes obvious that it is driven by solidarity and unity rather than solely resistance. While some interviewees, such as the one quoted above, suggested that this togetherness stemmed from contention in itself, other interviewees implied that is an integral part of the Hongkonger identity to stand in solidarity with other Hongkongers. One interviewee, who identifies as a light yellow Hongkonger, exemplified this by saying:

> *"I do have friends that are very involved so of course that changes things, but my everyday life is pretty much the same because I guess in some ways, I have always been yellow. Not the politics behind it, but what the movement stands for. It is just focused on Hong Kong and Hongkongers, and if you take the political out of that, it is just home for me. It's as normal to me as doing anything else that is typically Hong Kong" (Interviewee 7).*

The themes displayed in this finding, for example identity, are echoed by most of the interviewees. This points to how cultural and political identity is central for

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[14] The use of the word 'frontline' refers to 'frontline activism', where individuals are situated in visible or precarious positions with the ambition to facilitate participation in peaceful mass-mobilization (Lee & Chan, 2016).

those engaged in the YEC. The desire to sustain the idea of Hong Kong and Hongkongers is far more pronounced than the direct aspiration to realize democracy. However, one interviewee pointed to the potential issues with identity-driven contention, suggesting that it makes people join for 'shallow' reasons:

> *"It is almost like a statement, it makes you look good. Like "I'm into politics", "I'm smart", "I know what is right". [...]. I think some people join just to blend in. [...]. I always say that I'm not choosing shops, but I am still pro-democracy. My identity is not based on what shops I frequent, but my political views. But I still have friends that do not have the same grounding. They are the most vocal about joining the shops and put hashtags on the social medias and whatnot, even if they still work for the government" (Interviewee 8).*

There are internal strains of uneasiness associated with the shift towards an identity-driven contention, as the statement above can exemplify. This argument can be interpreted as frustration over the diverse discourses that drive the contention. Given the strong focus on identity which has been represented in the findings above, the individuals who are engaging as a way to progress the democratic movement and strains might indeed show grievances towards this development.

6.2   Spaces of contention

The purpose of looking at spaces of contention as a dimension of analysis is to enable the researcher to examine places in which contention occurs, and how these spaces, in turn, shape the contention (Yuen & Cheng, 2018). As discussed in previous literature, contentious politics in Hong Kong has been dominated by mass-mobilizations in the form of protests, making the physical space the main platform where contention occurs. After the introduction of the NSL in 2020, which together with stringent COVID-19 rules restricted possibilities of assembly, essentially all forms of open mass-mobilization rooted in political dissent in Hong

Kong have been curtailed. With this, contentious politics in Hong Kong have shifted to a more covert realm, and have become less confined by adjusting more to the everyday (Whitworth & Li, 2023). One of the interviewees discussed this shift by suggesting:

> *"I am more aware of my actions and how I can impact something by just doing some small things. In some way, my daily life has become more important. We can't protest and demonstrate, but we can shop and support in our daily lives"* *(Interviewee 9).*

Given how most physical spaces of contention have disintegrated, the movement has instead turned to everyday activities, which in this case relates to political consumerism. These activities occur in the everyday where the spaces of contention have moved to the marketplace, as suggested by Echegaray (2015). Along with this shift of spaces, the perception amongst most of the interviewees is that their way of participating in contention has changed, as well as their reason for engaging, where one stated:

> *"It used to be an active need to support businesses and protestors to give more money but now it is more about maintaining an idea. The hard times has shifted to being about the everyday life and keep a way of life going, but back in the days it was more about survival"* *(Interviewee 1).*

The expanded role of political consumerism was apparent prior to the introduction of the NSL, but seeing how spaces for open resistance have been targeted by the law, the act of moving contention into the everyday has allowed the movement to remain status quo. This is upheld by the reproduction of the view of Hong Kong as democratic, free, and open. However, what has been displayed here is the shift in how the movement was, and still is, reproduced in the marketplace. One interviewee stated that she has been deterred from engaging in contentious activities previously due to the use of violent tactics, but that the YEC has changed her mind about engaging in the larger pro-democracy movement. This

change in perception came from how yellow shops used symbols that were inherently supportive and positive:

> *"I thought in the beginning that it [YEC] was going to be quite unproductive as people started to throw rocks at windows and such, but when I started seeing how Post-it notes[15] and nice messages were spread through this, I started to look at it from another angle" (Interviewee 4).*

Moreover, the shift from physical mobilization such as street protests into the more low-risk everyday activity of engaging in consumer politics, several interviewees pointed to the safety of contemporary engagement in the pro-democracy movement. A clear distinction was drawn between engagement before and after the NSL, as interviewees suggested that the main way to be involved before the law was by joining demonstrations and protests, while the YEC has given individuals that were less inclined to do so another way to express themselves. One interviewee pointed to how street protests impacted his mental health, and suggested that his engagement in the YEC has had a more positive impact on his life:

> *"I had a lot of anxiety during protests and the whole pandemic, and then the yellow shops helped because I did not have to run to the streets anymore to help out, and I could focus on other things than just everything negative that was going on. You could still go to the yellow shops and make an Instagram about it even when it was really bad" (Interviewee 5).*

The shift from physical mobilization into the everyday has provided a space for risk-conscious individuals to engage in the pro-democracy movement in a more active manner. However, the movement being rooted in the everyday opens up

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[15] The Post-it notes refers to the 'Lennon Walls' that were common during the 2019 protests where Hong Kong citizens wrote messages, opinions and symbols on sticky notes and put them together on different walls around Hong Kong, creating a visual symbol of the pro-democracy movement (Whitworth & Li, 2023). Before the NSL, it was common for yellow shops to put sticky notes and small Lennon Walls in their shops to show support for the movement (Chan & Pun, 2020).

further discussion on how to separate political participation from everyday activities. Another interviewee suggested that it is impossible to separate the two:

"I get breakfast from a yellow shop, lunch that is from a yellow shop and my mum buys vegetables from yellow markets. Everything I eat is yellow, so I am fueled with yellow-ness. All of the shops we go to are yellow so my tailor is yellow and my books are yellow and my phone is even yellow. Everything in my life is yellow" (Interviewee 9).

In contrast with the views of Interviewee 9, the movement's dependence on those actively 'being yellow' has also impeded people's view of their engagement, citing that their everyday life is not 'yellow' enough:

"I try to be consistent in my only-visit-yellow shop-ness, which I have realized is quite hard. When you split society into two, which the movement does, it makes it quite hard to function in your everyday life. If I were to be fully-fully yellow, I wouldn't be able to take the MTR, many taxis or stuff like that, which I need to do" (Interviewee 10).

The view of not being involved enough is shared by another interviewee, who defines himself as dark yellow. While suggesting that people are getting too comfortable in the movement and losing sight of why the movement developed in the first place, he further stressed that there is an inherent need to be strict about the spaces where the contention occurs. He suggested that although the spaces of contention are limited to the yellow shops, much of the reason to be involved in the movement is to avoid shops that are blue or neutral:

"[...] I only go to yellow shops and avoid anything outside the circle as much as I can. That has changed my life quite a lot. It also feels good to always do something productive. Like, it is not that hard to be strict about it but it feel really good when you actually do something you believe in" (Interviewee 6).

The shift of spaces into the everyday which has allowed individuals further agency has hence led to differences of opinion regarding engagement in the movement. However, with the introduction of new media, much of the spaces in which contention occurs have shifted to a covert realm, seeing how social media has become an increasingly important space for contemporary contention.

6.2.1 The reliance on virtual spaces

As in most societies experiencing crackdown on civil liberties, social media plays a large role in the YEC, both in relation to its production and reproduction. One interviewee suggested that the YEC as a movement was largely formed through social media:

> *"When it [YEC] turned into a movement by itself, all these Instagram pages started to post about it and maps started to become frequent. [...] That's how it started, but it also became a talking point amongst people, like it was not just a thing in itself, but it became a phenomenon by itself through social media."* (Interviewee 2).

Several interviewees (3, 4, 8, and 9) rely on social media for information about yellow shops, but also the bigger pro-democracy movement in general, while others use it more sporadically (Interviewees 1 and 2). Here, the 'connective action' introduced in the theoretical framework has proven to be visible in the movement, with one interviewee saying that:

> *"I have also started to take part in social media posts and news about it, which makes it more of a part of my life. It gives me more insight in the bigger [pro-democracy] movement, which I wasn't aware of before"* (Interviewee 4).

The use of social media in the YEC arguably benefits the larger pro-democracy movement, as it is accessible and allows for the connective action to be informative for people that do not obtain information about the movement in other places. Although these factors can be regarded as inherently positive, they might

also paint a skewed picture of the movement and its purposes. The possibility of being fed wrongful information about the movement and the yellow shops is an inherent uncertainty- as with all Internet usage (Chuanli & Fei, 2018; Reichert, 2021). However, when asked about this potential peril, a majority of the interviewees did not view this as a hindrance, suggesting that it would not benefit those that are against the movement. One of the interviewees suggested that if people were to receive wrongful information about the yellow shops, it would be apparent when people visit the shop in question:

"I don't really think that people want to mislead as people outside of the movement doesn't really care. There is no need for anyone to give the wrong information as they do not really gain anything from it. The information is about making people make choices of where they want to go and what they want to do with the information. Also, I think it is rather clear when you are at a place whether they are 'yellow' or not" (Interviewee 3).

Interviewee 1, who believes that the strength of the movement lies in its symbolic value rather than its actual potential to bring about change, suggested that if wrongful information were to be provided it would not have a substantial impact on the movement as a whole. When asked if he thinks that people are critical regarding information spread via social channels, he responded:

"No. I think most people do not care, but they think they make a difference and that's about how far they actually think about it. I also think that some people actually do believe in whatever people say. There is no need in not believing it so to say. I mean no matter the reason as to why you do it, it will still make some sort of impact, because people's intentions are what they are" (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees 7, 8, and 9 also stressed the importance of the Internet in the reproduction of narratives and symbols related to contentious politics in Hong Kong in order to keep the pro-democracy movement alive. Interviewee 5 explained that he has a social media account on which he promotes yellow shops

with the purpose to help the movement financially, but also to spread positivity about the shops. When asked about how he expressed his participation in the YEC, he further explained:

> *"Mainly through my Instagram account. And through it I want to express that the movement is still active, even though people are not as open about it. A lot has been deleted and such, so it's important to keep posting. It is an easy way of saying that we are still here, we haven't left" (Interviewee 5).*

Although social media has proven to be a principal space in which the movement is produced and reproduced, the same interviewee pointed to how the movement still relies on physical mobilization through patronizing yellow shops:

> "*My Instagram is anonymous, but when I go to places I sometimes tell the owners or servers that I have this account. I would say that it is like an open secret. You don't run around screaming about it, but it is not necessarily something to hide. Or at least I do [not]. I think that defeats the purpose a bit, and maybe makes people shy away from it. It becomes something alien if you can't put a face to it" (Interviewee 5).*

This finding highlights the importance of sustaining the physical and identifiable aspects, as well as the physical spaces of mobilization. With social media being the main space for contemporary contention, the interviewee quoted above suggested that it might diminish the effects of the movement. By fully transitioning the movement into the virtual space, the collective identity within the city might dissolve. The acts of physically frequenting shops and being more or less open about engagement will, following the argument above, maintain the important aspect of the physical space, and in turn, strengthen the movement.

6.3   Practices of contention

The practices, which are the *acts* that individuals within the YEC use to make claims on others, are highly restricted in Hong Kong. Even in pre-NSL times the capacity of which individuals were able to participate in formal and institutionalized political activities was limited. One interviewee, who for the sake of transparency should be noted as having a vast interest in politics and studies political science, exemplified this by stating:

> *"I wish there was more to do, but growing up in Hong Kong, you are quite limited in your political activities unless you want to join the LegCo and the CCP, which I don't think is the right way for me. So I've been involved where I can without putting my future in danger" (Interviewee 10).*

When the focus shifts to contentious practices, the theoretical framework suggests that contentious acts are shaped by the social and societal context in which it occurs (Yuen & Cheng, 2018), and forces contention to materialize in less traditional ways. Looking at the post-NSL YEC and its grounding in political consumerism, the main themes considered in relation to contentious practices were buycotting and boycotting. Per Wong, Kwong, and Chan's (2021) discussion on individualism within political consumerism, the movement provides a space for people to express their opinions, while also being part of a larger mobilization. The role of political agency within the YEC is a recurring theme in most of the interviews, with one interviewee stating:

> *"I felt like it was a productive way of expressing how to feel and what we as a society expects to do. Like, I just wanted to be able to do something that showed my dissatisfaction with how things are progressing, but I'm not willing to potentially hurt a person for it. I know that some people, like deep yellow people, are ruining blue or green shops because of the circle [YEC], but I don't think it's comparable with the things that happened in 2019. It's constructive, it does not hurt anyone but the union between people and their political beliefs are*

productive in conveying a message. That's the main reason why I got involved
actually" (Interviewee 4).

In the case of Hong Kong, the shift from acts that are inherently collective, such as mass-mobilization of protests, to more individualistic is very clear in relation to the introduction of the NSL in 2020, as well as COVID-19 restrictions. This shift also suggests that practices move into a more symbolic realm rather than overtly strategic. The findings in the interview data highlighted the notion of performative and expressive practices through symbolism, where one interviewee suggested that the underlying reasons for people to join in are less important than actually partaking in the movement:

> *"If I could give money directly [to protestors] I would, but this [YEC] is also a*
> *good symbol to show people that there are other people still active in it, no matter*
> *the reason why you do it" (Interviewee 5).*

This notion is echoed by other interviewees (1, 3, 7, 8, and 10) who suggested that the act of showing support is more important than being strict about the engagement in the YEC, quoting buycotting as their main way of practicing contention:

> *"I do consider myself to be true to the movement, because in its core I believe it*
> *to be democratic and political as it allows you to take decisions that supports the*
> *things you want to support. I don't think taking the MTR or such things make you*
> *a bad person or a bad participant, because the movement is about free choice*
> *and the right to do what you want. That is how I feel" (Interviewee 10).*

One interviewee argued that the symbolic action of buycotting mobilized her engagement to an extent which protesting and boycotting does not:

> *"I [..] work in a line of business that will not let me be super engaged in it*
> *because we do work closely with the government, but that doesn't stop me from*

being involved in my spare time, only how much I can be engaged. I mean, there's
always more that you can do, but you need to be able to live a decent life as well"
(Interviewee 4).

In her response, the stigma surrounding engagement in contentious politics in Hong Kong becomes visible, as she highlighted the importance of her practices being hidden in her everyday life. However, the practices made possible through the YEC have allowed her to be engaged in a manner she deems safe, constructive, and fitting for her way of life. This way of looking at engagement in the YEC can be contrasted with a dark-yellow interviewee, who suggested that it is not the symbolic actions that are important in relation to the movement, but the strictness of practicing both boy- and buycotting:

"I think the main point of the movement is to be very focused on the yellow shops
and not supporting the other ones. If you're not strict about that, the movement
does not make any sense" (Interviewee 6).

There is a clear discrepancy between how individuals view practices in relation to the YEC, but what is similarly clear is that participation in the YEC is largely driven by the individual's own creed. This relates back to the dynamics of contention approach introduced in the theoretical framework and reaffirms the pressing importance of acknowledging agency when studying contention. Hence, the next part will look further at the mobilizing aspect of practicing contention.

6.3.1 The YEC as a mobilizing practice

During the interviews, some interviewees (4, 7, 8, and 10) suggested that their engagement in the pro-democracy movement prior to the YEC had been essentially nominal, citing the disinclination of joining the mass-mobilizations in 2019 after seeing how the 2014 Umbrella Movement played out. Here, emphasis was placed on the use of violent practices to progress the movement. Instead, they

became increasingly active in politics through the YEC, as they recognized the peaceful and productive actions taken in relation to the movement:

> *"[...] I got more involved in the circle because I think it is productive . [...] It's like a peaceful protest where no one is breaking the law or ruining anything. It's nothing like what happened in 2019" (Interviewee 10).*

This sentiment was reflected by another interviewee, who mentioned that he became more active in the larger pro-democracy movement through the YEC. While being hesitant to fully engage in the 2019 protests, his current engagement stems from a weigh-off between the benefits of being vocal about his engagement, and the potential risks that it might provoke. While seeing larger risks with physical mobilization, he suggested:

> *"I think my interest for the yellow shops is as big as it is, because it is easy to be involved without any big repercussions. It is good to be able to do something even if you are a bit scared" (Interviewee 5).*

Through a few of the interviews, it also became clear that those with limited knowledge of politics in general, and contentious politics in particular, views YEC as a valuable movement to engage in. One interviewee conveyed that she has always been reluctant to express her political views, as she perceived that she has limited knowledge on the topic. More than anything, she was reluctant to discuss her views as she was afraid to be perceived as "dumb" or having the "wrong views". She expressed that the YEC has helped her be more open about her views, as she considers people engaged to be more accepting than in earlier movements:

> *"I want to show my support to the shops and the people in the movement. I also think that it's an easy thing for me to do, even though I don't know much about politics. [..] now it's very accepting of being less into it because people don't care. As long as you are involved, I don't think you will be judged" (Interviewee 7).*

From this finding, the shift away from practices rooted in politics to more identity-driven contention is detected. Much like the findings related to discourses, support and unanimity play a large part in why people engage in the YEC. A majority of the interviewees pointed to how they financially supported the pro-democracy movement and those that were impacted by their engagement prior to the NSL. Post-NSL, it became more difficult to donate money directly to organizations and individuals as many became afraid of potential financial repercussions. The YEC thus provided an opportunity for individuals to contribute economically to those that needed it. Two of the interviewees discussed this, by stating:

> *"At one point, people just started to leave money. A coffee could be 15 [Hong Kong dollars] but then people put down 500 and then they asked for no change and just went" (Interviewee 8).*

> *"[...] I should put money in something, it might as well be in something that will help more people [...], I would want to pay a little bit extra there then knowing for certain that it will just go to someone else. If I could give money directly I would, but this is also a good symbol to show people that there are other people still active in it, no matter the reason why you do it. I think that is the main reason why I am strict about it, because it will be more helpful in the end than if I didn't put most of my money into the movement" (Interviewee 5).*

Thus, the actions that are practiced in connection to the YEC are more related to buycotting than boycotting, which is visible in sentiments such as the ones above. However, this in turn opens up issues related to class structures, where a few interviewees argue that the capitalist structure of the movement provides some individuals with more agency than others. One interviewee brought up this issue by stating:

> *"[...] I want to acknowledge something. I can be strict about it because I can afford it. I am very privileged in my life and that gives me more room to be more*

conscious of where I put my money. I can go to more expensive restaurants and
shops because I have the means to" (Interviewee 2).

This can be viewed as an impediment to the movement's sustainability, as it might hinder individuals from engaging in collective action by moving into an exclusive realm that obstructs participation, making it a possible threat to the movement's sustainability. However, according to the interviewees, the opportunities related to the movement far outweigh the potential threats. It is argued that in the post-NSL era, where contentious spaces and practices have been targeted by the government, particularly through the NSL, there are not many remaining ways to express dissent. Thus, having a movement with some potential shortcomings is valued over no movement at all. During her interview, Interviewee 8 problematized engagement in the YEC, citing how the movement is shifting attention away from the pro-democracy struggles. However, when asked about her views on the YEC as a tool for promoting democracy, she said:

"It's either that way or by leaving Hong Kong. But of course, if you leave you do
give up on people who stay. I mean, what else can we do?" (Interviewee 8).

6.4   Summary of findings

The findings show that there are several discourses, spaces, and practices which sustain participation in contentious politics in Hong Kong. A visualization of the finding is presented below in Figure 2. Firstly, the most prominent discourses that the interviewees discussed were democracy, solidarity, identity, and resistance. Less focus was shed on localism and conservation. Secondly, the main spaces that were highlighted were everyday spaces, where social media and consumerism were highlighted. The increased importance of these spaces can be considered to be on account for the NSL, but also COVID-19 restrictions. Only a few of the interviewees discussed the physical space as one that sustains their involvement, while others stated that it would sooner hinder them from engaging in contentious practices in the future. However, it became apparent that engagement in the YEC

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is driven by physical mobilization, as frequenting yellow shops is crucial for the movement to subsist. Thirdly, the main practice that was brought up by the interviewees was buycotting. Less focus was given to the practice of boycotting, which relates back to the discourses of solidarity and identity. The practices are also, to a larger extent than in previous cycles of contention, related to the everyday. This was argued by several interviewees to be mobilizing in itself.

Discourses	Spaces	Practices
Frequent Solidarity Identity Democracy Resistance Less frequent Conservation Localism	Frequent New media Everyday Less frequent Physical	Frequent Buycotting Mobilizing Less frequent Boycotting Protesting

Figure 2: Visualization of themes identified in the findings.

7 Discussion

In this chapter, the findings will be discussed by situating them in the wider debate on anti-authoritarian mobilization. This will be done in relation to themes detected in previous literature on the topic and the theoretical framework. First, engagement in the YEC will be discussed in relation to the discourses, spaces, and practices detected in the findings. Second, the role of agency amongst participants will be discussed to illustrate how mobilization in the movement is realized through the participants. Lastly, reflections on the future of the YEC and anti-authoritarian mobilization in Hong Kong will be discussed.

7.1 Mobilization in the YEC

There are many reasons as to why civil mobilization occurs in authoritarian contexts, where dissent is generally suppressed, and driven by a propagation for democratic reform (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Chuanli and Fei (2018) suggested that social identity, injustices, and efficacy are the three main components that drive collective action, and all three of these are visible in the findings in relation to Hong Kong. What sets Hong Kong, and by extension the YEC, apart from other contentious cases and movements (as brought up in Chapter 3) is context. Hong Kong has never been a full democracy, citing its history as a British colony and present-day special administrative region under a hybrid regime (Chan, 2022). The earlier platforms for contention were effectively targeted by the 2020 introduction of the NSL, where acts of dissent were criminalized. This once again raises the research question: *What mobilizes individuals to sustain their participation in contentious political activities in Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian setting?*

It is apparent from the findings that contemporary contention in Hong Kong has shifted following the implementation of the NSL. However, through the YEC, political dissent has been sustained. This has been achieved by moving contentious practices into spaces that are more covert, such as everyday social

practices. Moreover, the practices have become 'safer', seeing how they relate to everyday acts such as consumption and social media postings. In turn, this has rendered contention decentralized and less structured, as has the rationales for individual engagement. Further, the YEC builds on a nature of non-violence which has, as suggested by Schock (2005), promoted broad-based participation. Reminiscing over the 2019 protests, where violent tactics were utilized, half of the interviewees pointed to the risks of engaging as protestors got harmed and arrested and cited that this hindered their full engagement in the pro-democracy movement. The non-violent nature of the YEC allows individuals to partake at a lower risk, seeing how the movement, in accordance with Stephan and Chenoweth's (2008) argument, has lower commitment barriers compared to physical mobilizations. As a result, the movement possesses a moral force where the risk of engaging is lower than the perceived payoff (Gamboa, 2022: 22). This in turn established a basis for a dispersed collective action, in which solidarity towards a shared, collective identity is central (Sing, 2020). The importance of solidarity is further highlighted in the findings, seeing how practices such as buycotting were far more prevalent and central than boycotting.

The diffusion of political activism in Hong Kong has been facilitated by a range of factors, including the use of social media and the availability of public spaces for protest and demonstration. It is important to note that this development is also highly connected to the inability to physically mobilize due to the NSL and COVID-19 restrictions. As the YEC permeates the whole region, it once again lowers the commitment barriers for individuals to engage, per the suggestion by Lilja and Vinthagen (2018). The movement is, although dispersed and decentralized, still highly organizational at its core, where political consumerism relies on a distinction between shops that reinforce the Hong Kong identity, and shops that do not. The organizational aspect can be seen through maps (see appendix D for a visual of one of the maps used in the YEC) with yellow, blue, and green shops marked out are utilized. Similarly, social media is used to promote and display yellow shops in order to allow individuals to make informed

choices regarding their consumption, for instance through the hashtags #黃店[16] and #黃色經濟圈[17]. This has aided the production and reproduction of the movement and rendered contention to be highly accessible for individuals, seeing how contention has moved into the covert, everyday realm. The grounding in political consumerism also demands some levels of physical mobilization, seeing how it is important to physically frequent shops within the circle.

Further, the structure of the YEC has facilitated a more unobtrusive approach to contention. This, however, has created separation in the movement, noting how the passive conduct of engagement in the YEC has undeniably sparked frustrations amongst some participants. Here, grievances are expressed towards other individuals, citing them participating for "*the wrong reasons*" or "*not in the right way*" (Interviewees 4, 5, 8, and 9). However, this is a common occurrence in movements that are decentralized and leaderless (Graziano & Forno, 2012) and is a weigh-off between potential perils and potential benefits of engagement. Chan (2022), Chan and Ng (2020), and Tang and Cheng (2020) all pointed to how a decentralized strategy has allowed the pro-democracy movement to re-shape in order to counter the political development in Hong Kong, laying the foundation for the YEC. In response to the NSL, discourses, practices, and spaces have altered to withstand the changes in governmental repertoires. An example here is individuals' reasons for sustained engagement. It has been expressed that the interviewees' rationale for engaging is less to actively support the pro-democracy movement, and more to protect the idea of a democratic Hong Kong and the freedom this represents. Contention presented in the YEC is therefore not only shaped by widespread discourses but also reproduced in them. In this sense, the movement becomes more extensive now than in earlier episodes which relied on mass-mobilization, seeing how the YEC is allowing for a broader adoption of discourses. In the interview data, it was found that the main discourses expressed were democracy, solidarity, conservation, resistance, and

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[16] The hashtag roughly translates into yellow shops. (Source of translation: informant).
[17] The hashtag roughly translates into Yellow Economic Circle. (Source of translation: informant).

identity. Often, these were combined, making individuals' rationales for engagement diverse.

Further, Bishara (2021) suggested that movements that have developed over space and time are more likely to be sustained, as the generative power of contention has constructed a collective memory of resistance. Reiterating Yuen and Cheng's (2018: 9) labeling of Hong Kong as a 'city of protest', it can be argued that there is a well-established culture of contention, as well as resistance, in the collective memory. The idea of a generative power is particularly visible in relation to the YEC, as the interviewees do not regard the YEC as its own movement but as a continuation of the pro-democracy movement. This proposes that the YEC is not forming a new organizational capacity nor collective identity, but is produced through other movements over time. This goes in line with Pinckney's (2020: 252) argument that movements with an organizational aspect that develops over time are more likely to be sustained. This as a sense of 'togetherness' has been established amongst the participants through episodes of contention. It can be exemplified by the concept of 'shopping yellow', which can be linked to the localist movements of the 1970s, which is also when the Hongkonger identity started to develop (Bishara, 2021: 1723; Ma, 2007: 160).

This notion separates the YEC from the ideas presented in the structural-functionalist approach, seeing how engagement arose through the adaption of other forms of political participation, rather than being prompted by structural reform. Similarly, the findings suggest that contention has moved beyond a neo-institutionalist conceptualization, seeing in which way the interviewees frame democratic progression as a discourse for their engagement in the YEC. Democracy is here central as a driving force for mobilization, but not in the sense of institutional democracy. Instead, democracy is framed as a cultural issue and expressed within the YEC as a fundamental condition for participation in contention. Relating back to the rational choice theory, it becomes noticeable that mobilization in the YEC is not driven by an ambition to secure maximum benefits (Ostrom, 1991), in this case, through realized democracy, but rather as a way for democratic culture to persist. This refutes approaches that suggest that

democratic culture is a product of democratic regime change and can thus not exist without it (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). As a cultural issue, democracy becomes part of the Hongkonger identity, where the YEC is situated as a mediator between pro-democracy mobilization and identity-driven mobilization. This is confirmed by interviewees who concluded that the YEC itself would not realize democracy. In turn, it challenges the rational choice theory, which suggests that without a prospect of success, individuals will not engage in contentious politics. However, as proven by the findings and previous literature, the YEC is a resolute and dynamic movement, where individuals without any evident prospects for success are willing to take the risks that come with anti-authoritarian, and anti-China, mobilization. Either Hongkongers, as a population, can be argued to be highly irrational, or a different explanation for their participation is needed. The movement field approach allowed for a deeper examination of individual agency, which resulted in solidarity and identity being the main drivers behind contemporary contention. Several interviewees (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8) were directly outspoken that their engagement in the YEC does not stem from a willingness to change anything but from showing solidarity by resisting influences that will impede or destroy the inherent democratic identity of Hongkongers, and by doing so taking away the rights of the people. Thus, a shift from rational choice's 'risk versus reward' to the dynamics of contention's 'opportunity versus threat' better encompasses the narratives surrounding agency displayed in the findings.

7.2 Agency and participation

From the findings, it is indisputable that mobilization still occurs in Hong Kong. What else has been made clear is that the contention has shifted from being physical and driven by an urge for structural reform, to more symbolic where safeguarding of a collective Hong Kong identity is central. Relating this back to the neo-institutionalist framework and the rational choice theory, it is suggested that opportunist individuals act when the perceived gain is larger than the payoff

(Hall & Taylor, 1996; Scharpf, 1989). This, however, neglects to acknowledge the role of agency within contemporary contention. The perceptions of risks in the post-NSL era are highly individual, and although individuals certainly are rational in this weigh-off, their choices need to be moved into the sphere of agency rather than rational choice. The interviewees all represent different levels of engagement, from Interviewee 7 who is strict in his commitment, to Interviewee 6 who participates to the best of her abilities. It also became apparent that the level of engagement is inconsistent, seeing how the interviewees cite that their levels of engagement have fluctuated over the last couple of years. This corresponds with an examination into participation in contentious politics where Corrigall-Brown (2012) found that it is common for participants to move in and out of engagement citing their socio-economic positioning instead of being life-long, habitual activists. In turn, this suggestion allows participants more agency in their engagement, which is more likely to sustain their engagement over time. There is, however, a sense of frustration regarding the prospects of the movement, as the everyday manner of mobilization is, according to some interviewees, more unlikely to yield any abiding result. The *"I do what I can"* mentality yields the participants a sense of agency, but may instead fail to sustain the movement in the long run.

It is evident from previous studies that agency is an important factor in anti-authoritarian contexts, political consumerism, and the Hong Kong context in general. The role of agency is undeniably important to acknowledge in all forms of mobilization, but can, due to the obsolete notions of political apathy (Degoyler & Scott, 1996), be argued to be further important in relation to Hong Kong. The findings have made it abundantly clear that individual agency plays a large role in contemporary contention, as the YEC has provided a platform for individuals to engage as they deem appropriate. Nonetheless, this has in turn created issues in relation to the sustainability of the YEC, seeing how the lack of centralization and strictness can be viewed as an impediment to the success of the movement. The notion of political agency is therefore distinct, as the democratic structures in Hong Kong are now more visible culturally rather than institutionally. The

findings suggest that the preservation of a Hong Kong identity is more mobilizing than the notion to realize democracy.

7.3 The future of contention in Hong Kong

This thesis has established that political contention is an ongoing process. Yet, it also raises potential issues that can challenge the sustainability of contention through the YEC. A preeminent element to acknowledge is the considerable separation of ideas of what the YEC consists of, which can be beneficial for the movement as it is shaped by the individuals engaging in it, rather than a static idea. However, this can also be identified as a weakness of the movement, seeing how it naturally allows individuals to participate in levels they deem accessory. The grounding in political consumerism allows people to be as involved as they deem appropriate, making the movement facile and intelligible. Looking at other movements within the field of political consumerism, it is argued that progress has mainly been made in movements that are strict (Gundelach, 2020; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). However, seeing how the YEC has shifted contention into the everyday, the strictness it would entail (boycotting all businesses that are not supporting the movement or with links to the mainland) quickly becomes arduous for the participants. For instance, Interviewee 6, a dark yellow participant, who is very strict with his engagement, cites his need to use the MTR to sustain his everyday life. None of the interviewees are thus 'fully participating', citing their need to maintain their way of life. The leniency towards strict engagement is not hindering the sustainability of the movement but allows individuals to engage on their own terms.

Another issue that has been brought to life is political consumerism in itself. The practices of buy- and boycotting have allowed for more agency, but the background in neo-liberal notions of capitalism must be acknowledged due to a potential hazard related to the issue with class structures. The monetary cost of participating can deter individuals who are in economically precarious situations from joining the movement. This issue can in turn prevent the YEC from fully

engendering a shared 'Hong Kong identity'. However, considering how the findings point to the YEC being grounded in a collective political identity, the potential of these deteriorating the movement can be considered to be improbable.

Further, the shift of contention into the everyday has changed participants' views on engaging in the wider pro-democracy movement, seeing how the convenience of the YEC has provided a less intimidating and stressful place to practice contention (Interviewees 1 and 5). This also coincides with the facilitation of social media to drive mobilization. As argued by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), social media in this case works as a complementary strategy to collective action rather than a replacement and allows participants to reproduce the movement using new media. This is highly pertinent in the case of Hong Kong, seeing how new media has become one of the main spaces for participation. Not only does it provide a space for the YEC to be reproduced and shared, but it also lends a space to disseminate the symbolic value of the movement. Seeing how many social media users have started to self-censor (Freedom House, 2023), there is a potential that these online spaces will diminish. However, it can be argued that this is not a concern as of now, seeing how widely it is utilized by those participating.

One last, but very interesting finding from the interviews is the survival of dissent in the region. In the wake of the NSL, it was suggested that all forms of political expression would effectively be shut down. However, it has become evident that contentious mobilization still occurs in the city, but not exclusively in relation to the YEC. A present-day example can be observed in relation to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Realms. In the weeks following the Queen's death on September 8, 2022, thousands of people paid their respects to the monarch by leaving flowers and messages outside of the British Consulate-General, reigniting the debate about political expression under the NSL (see Cheung & Ma, 2022; Magramo, 2022; Tsoi & Lee, 2022; and Wang & Yoon, 2022). One interviewee brought this up by saying:

"[...] I do think that it is cool to look at how Hongkongers [...] persist and find ways to express ourselves even if there are no ways. Look at when the Queen [Elizabeth II] died. Many people left flowers because they were sad, mostly older people, but then it became a way to rub it in the government's faces so more and more people started to leave flowers and words of encouragement" (Interviewee 10).

Although this finding highlights the complex history of being a British colony (see Carroll, 2007), it also speaks to the resilience of contention in Hong Kong. It does so by shedding light on an important aspect of political contention in Hong Kong, and amongst Hongkongers: the collective memory of resistance will always find new opportunities to prevail when threats are made against the possibilities of expression.

8 Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to understand sustained engagement in contentious politics in Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian context. Hong Kong as a case was chosen since it follows the global trend of democratic backsliding, whilst simultaneously civil mobilization has been sustained. By looking at Hong Kong, it could thus inform us of mechanisms and patterns which sustain contention today. This phenomenon is, as is often the case with social events, embedded in a broad historical and political context. Therefore, in achieving the aims of this thesis a prerequisite was to gain an in-depth understanding of the development and trajectory of Hong Kong's political history as well as the make-up of contemporary contention. Moreover, a review of earlier scholarship on anti-authoritarian mobilization, and Hong Kong's experience with this in particular provided the research with themes and discourses that were explored in the theoretical framework. This provided the research with themes and discourses that were explored in the theoretical framework. A framework centered around agency and mobilization was needed, which in turn translated into the use of the approaches 'dynamic of contention' and 'the movement field', both focusing on non-static, agency-driven research. These approaches lent the thesis levels of analysis and shaped the processing of the interview data. Looking back at the research question by which this thesis was guided, it states: *What mobilizes individuals to sustain their participation in contentious political activities in Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian setting?*

What mobilizes individuals to participate and sustain their engagement in the pro-democracy movement is agency allowing individuals to decide in what practices and spaces to engage, depending on what discourse their participation is rooted in. Once again, Hong Kong's decentralized and leaderless movement structure proved to be beneficial for people participating in contentious politics in the region. As identity and solidarity are the main discourses within contention in Hong Kong, it speaks to the individual's own consideration of threats versus opportunities and ensures individual activism is the main cause for engaging.

Contemporary contention in Hong Kong is framed by political consumerism, which is used less as a way to reach political goals and more for individuals seeking to express their political identity. Contention has thus been sustained through the consolidation of the cultural and political identity of Hongkongers, rather than as a response to structural transformations. As the collective political identity is shaped by cultural identity, it can be argued that the Hong Kong identity cannot be separated from a notion of cultural democracy.

Lastly, the findings emphasize that the YEC is not considered to be an end, but rather a means for the collective identity to persist while *"they wait for better solutions"*, rhetorically asking *"what else can we do?"*. Thus, what mobilizes individuals is not the idea of a democratic Hong Kong but more so the survival of a Hong Kong that is alive in the collective, democratic identity of Hongkongers.

8.1 Avenues for further research

In order to further understand how contention is sustained in contexts with little to no prospects of success, other cases must be examined. Looking at additional cases rooted in identity issues, such as Catalonia or Northern Ireland, could provide a substantial grounding for this inquiry, making it more generalizable. Moreover, although the sample was large enough to reach saturation and fulfill the aims of this thesis, a study on the topic with a larger sample would allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of contemporary contention in Hong Kong, and by extension, of contentious politics in authoritarian spaces in general. While the call for a larger sample may read as if this thesis has not reached saturation, that is not correct. A larger study would allow for further perspectives to be included, for instance, shopkeepers and business owners involved. This could aid the understanding of how the YEC is sustained, and not only why individuals have sustained their involvement.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Discussion regarding anonymity, purpose, and consent to interview.
1. **General information**
   a. Please tell me about yourself: Age, gender identity, occupation, geographical identity, movement identity,
   b. Have you previously been involved in any political activities in Hong Kong?
      i. Could you please tell me more about these activities?
      ii. What was the purpose of participating in these activities?
   c. Can you please tell me how long you have been involved in the YEC?
      i. Why did you start frequenting yellow shops?
   d. How did you get to know about the shops in the first place?
2. **Pre-NSL engagement**
   a. How did you participate in the YEC pre-NSL?
      i. How was the yellow economy expressed in your everyday life?
   b. How do you think the system of yellow and blue shops is working in practice?
3. **Post-NSL engagement**
   a. Has your engagement in the circle changed in the last two years?
      i. <u>If yes:</u> What are your purposes for engaging today?
      ii. <u>If no:</u> In what ways is it the same?
   b. How do you get information about the yellow businesses?
      i. Do you know where the information comes from?
   c. How strict are you regarding only frequenting yellow businesses?
      i. <u>Depending on the answer:</u> Has it become more or less important to only frequent yellow shops?
   d. How does your involvement in the YEC influence your daily life?
      i. In what ways?
   e. How open/public are you regarding your participation in the yellow economy?
      i. In what ways do you express your participation?
4. **Closing questions**
   a. Is there something else you would like me to consider regarding what we have talked about today?

Appendix B: List of Participants

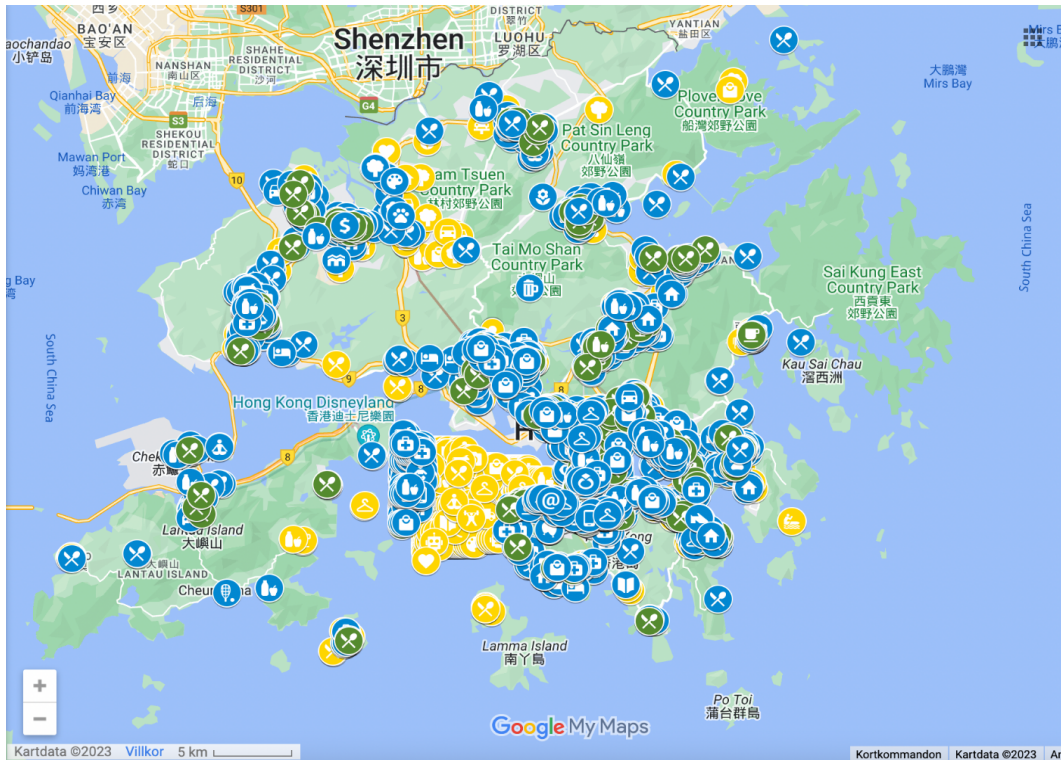| #	Age	Gender identity	Occupation	Geographic identity	Movement identity
1	30s	Male	Works in an art gallery	Hong Kong Chinese	Yellow
2	31	Female	Works in finance	Hong Kong Chinese	Yellow
3	20	Female	Student	Hongkonger	Light yellow
4	26	Female	Works with infrastructure	Chinese	Yellow
5	20s	Male	Student & runs a non-profit Instagram account reviewing yellow shops	Hongkonger	Yellow to dark yellow
6	20s	Male	Student, studies abroad	Hongkonger	Dark yellow
7	Late 20s	Female	Works in the service industry	Hongkonger	(Light) Yellow
8	30	Female	Works in the public sector	Hong Kong Chinese	Light yellow
9	20s	Female	Student, STEM	Hongkonger	Yellow
10	20s	Male	Student, Political Science	Hong Kong Chinese	(Democratic) Yellow

Appendix C: Coding Example

Theme	Sub-codes	Sample quotations
Agency	Opportunity	*"I felt like it (YEC) was a productive way of expressing how to feel and what we as a society expects to do. Like, I just wanted to be able to do something that showed my dissatisfaction with how things are progressing, but I'm not willing to potentially hurt a person for it".* Interview 4
	Participation	*"It is just that people just want to do something, cause there is nothing we can do (other than participate in the YEC). People are desperate to make our voices heard.[...]. There is literally no way for us to make out voices heard anymore".* Interview 8
	Struggle	*"I wish there was more to do but growing up in Hong Kong, you are quite limited in your political activities unless you want to join the LegCo and the CCP, which I don't think is the right way for me. So I've been involved where I can without putting my future in danger".* Interview 10
Discourses	Conservation	*"It (YEC) also works in maintaining Hong Kong's culture, which I think is important to maintain the democracy movement".* Interview 2
	Democracy	*"I ran out of options of things to do to make my voice heard. I am not one of the people that believes that this is the grand solution to all problems, but at least we are doing something. Like I said before, I am not a highly political person unless it's for what I stand for, and much of the yellow shops and us yellow ribbons are grounded in the same belief. I also have a partner who is highly involved who does it for many purposes, but I do it for democracy. In worst case scenario, it is my democratic choice to choose where I can eat and so on".* Interview 2
	Identity	*"Hongkongers are democratic beings, and that is how we are shaped since always. Being part of the democracy movement is the most Hong Kong thing you can do, and for that purpose, it is important to keep working with it".* Interview 2
	Localism	*"I thought it (participating in YEC) was a good*

		idea to do. I want Hong Kong to remain and I shop yellow because of that. We are yellow so we should shop yellow? If we want Hong Kong shops, why would we give money to non-Hong Kong shops? It doesn't make sense to me actually". Interview 9
	Resistance	*"I would never quit the effort of going to yellow shops because that is like giving up on the Hong Kong that many want in the future, and it would be like laying down and accepting things to be the way they are or getting even worse". Interview 3*
	Solidarity	*"I wanted to keep on helping other Hongkongers that needed help, but I didn't know how. When I learned about the yellow shops, I thought it was very smart, like it was such a simple way for me to be involved and at the same time help people".* Interview 5
Spaces	Everyday	*"I am not strict about it, but I only visit yellow shops. Like, it's not a decision I make for fun, but just something I do because I have always done it. It is not a choice but a part of who I am. Its not like I'm on a diet and is strict in that sense, but more like a way of life. Like what you told me about recycling in Sweden, you don't do it for fun but because it is a must. Would you say that you are strict about recycling? Probably not, right? You do it because it is how you have always done it, because it is the only way to do it". Interview 8*
	New media	*"I think it's good to post on hashtags as people will know about places and the movement keeps on growing. That is my hope and reasoning at least".* Interview 3
	Physical	*"My Instagram is anonymous, but when I go to places I sometimes tell the owners or servers that i have this one account. I would say that it is like an open secret. You don't run around screaming about it, but it is not necessarily something to hide. Or at least I do. I think that defeats the purpose a bit, and maybe makes people shy away from it. It becomes something alien if you can't put a face to it". Interview 5*
	Boycotting	*"That's why I started to refuse to go to other places. I didn't want to support anything that was collaborating with those ideas, because that would have been the death stab for anything relating to*

Practices			*freedom in Hong Kong"*. Interview 6
	Buycotting		*"I thought it was a good idea to do. I want Hong Kong to remain and I shop yeow because of that. We are yellow so we should shop yellow? If we want Hong Kong shops, why would we give money to non-Hong Kong shops? It doesn't make sense to me actually"*. Interview 9
	Mobilizing		*"I had a lot of anxiety during protests and the whole pandemic, and then the yellow shops helped because I did not have to run to the streets anymore to help out, and I could focus on other things than just everything negative that was going on. You could still go to the yellow shops and make an Instagram about it even when it was really bad"*. Interview 5
	Protesting		*"It was a natural progression, but then I did an active choice to support this one hundred percent, and now I have since. I did it because I wanted to be active in the movement. This is the problem with the movement in general, not enough people dare to do the right thing. If more people and shops would have gotten involved when we had the chance I don't think we would be where we are today. Look at what happened in 2019, when people actually could speak up. Then the law changed because we protested about it. If everyone would get involved now instead of waiting for other people to do it we wouldn't have an issue actually"*. Interview 6

Appendix D: Map Over Yellow, Green and Blue Shops in Hong Kong

Source:
https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=11zThwHjrFwBlNCStMQavBd
ryuESKzcdR&ll=22.354478941014587%2C114.16212117085304&z=11