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## A subtle form of civic engagement in Hong Kong

Fung, Cheryl

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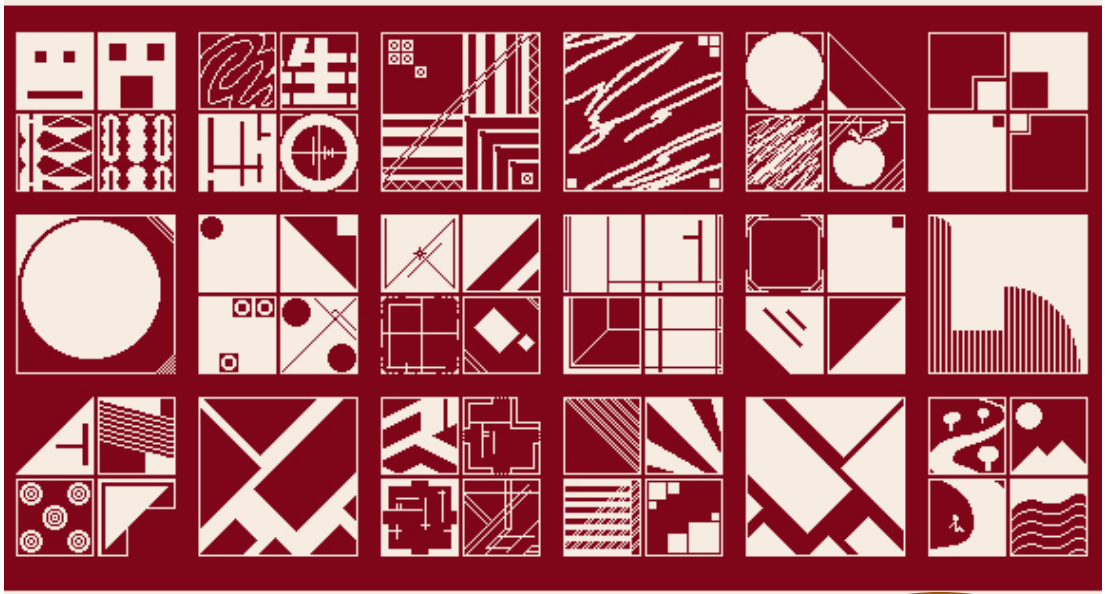
CHERYL FUNG
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION | LUND UNIVERSITY



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## A subtle form of civic engagement in Hong Kong

Cheryl Fung

LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**Abstract:**

This thesis challenges the assumption that expressions that do not actively seek attention is less significant in the research of civic engagement, by foregrounding the arts of subtle resistance in contexts of social movement abeyance, heightened media censorship and digital surveillance. Drawing upon the empirical case of Hong Kong, where a National Security Law was enacted in 2020 to discourage expressions of dissident voices, this thesis examines the evolvement of pro-democracy visual protest culture in recent years and explores the social significances of engagement surrounding this evolving form of visual civic talk on Instagram. By introducing the concept of *civic visuals*—artwork (primarily digital) that are characterised by their ambiguity, cultural nuance, playfulness, and emotional resonance rather than overt political expressions—this thesis explores how political discussions and remembrance of social movements can be sustained by—and help sustain—civic cultures. Drawing on Dahlgren's (2003; 2005; 2009) framework of civic cultures and Dewey's (1934) aesthetic theories, this thesis approaches civic visuals as meaningful expressions that are cultivated and sustained in the everyday life.

Using a visually-driven multimethod approach, this qualitative study investigates the engagement and meanings of civic visuals and their appropriated symbols with an aim to underline their subtlety and aesthetics nuances. On the one hand, the ambiguity embedded in civic visuals suggests that these expressions seek little attention from the wider audience. On the other hand, it highlights the exclusiveness of the engagement, in which only informed and like-minded individuals within the communities are likely to participate. This thesis argues that the power of civic visuals lies not only in confrontation, but in their capacity to navigate repression creatively and unobtrusively. The findings indicate how ordinary aesthetics, personal memories, collective nostalgia, humour, and play are key to invite and sustain discussions of contentious topics and remembrance of silenced voices within online civic communities in times of uncertainty and precarity.

Through contextualising and conceptualising civic visuals, this thesis contributes to the scholarly discussions on latent form of civic engagement by shifting empirical focus from direct and explicit expressions of contention and dissent, to those that appear to be ambiguous and seemingly mundane.

**Key words:** Media, civic cultures, civic engagement, civic talk, visual methods, aesthetics, nostalgia, play, social movements, social media, Instagram, Hong Kong

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*To mom and dad*

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CCP | The Chinese Communist Party |
| CA | Communications Authority |
| CE | Chief Executive |
| ELAB | Extradition Law Amendment Bill |
| HKFP | Hong Kong Free Press |
| LegCo | Legislative Council of Hong Kong |
| NSL | National Security Law |
| RSF | Reporters sans frontières/ Reporters Without Borders |
| RTHK | Radio Television Hong Kong |
| SAR | Special Administrative Region |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |

# Preface

I was a first-year university student when the Umbrella Movement took place in 2014. It was one of the first city-wide social movements that I had witnessed, and also the first large-scale social movement in which my peers participated. I remember sitting on the ground in the business district of Admiralty, together with my friends and thousands of other students, on the occupied eight-lane freeway of Harcourt Road. Student protesters and other activists had united there to voice a single demand—'genuine' universal suffrage in the election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive, which has been promised to the people of Hong Kong by Beijing since its handover from the British government in 1997. It is an interesting fact that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong is the second-highest-paid government leader in the world, second only to the Prime Minister of Singapore. Although the Chief Executive earns a higher salary than the US president and is regarded as 'constitutionally more powerful than most presidents in the world' (Lee 2019:5; Ma 2007:59), the taxpayers and voters in Hong Kong play almost zero role in his or her election. The Umbrella Movement was therefore a result of delays in the implementation of universal suffrage and a point of departure for more protests to blossom in the city.

In Harcourt Road and the surrounding area, a lot of activities were happening at the same time. Students wearing school uniforms were sitting on the ground, some doing their homework and others perhaps preparing for upcoming tests and quizzes. Young protesters handed out supplies including water and food, walking up to different groups of people and asking if anyone needed anything. Some passers-by walked from the MTR station to check out the usually heavily trafficked highway, on which there was now not a single car in sight. Over at the Lennon Wall, hundreds of Post-It notes displayed protesters' wishes and messages. New notes were constantly being added to the colourful collection, in the hope that these wishes would be heard by government officials. So many things were taking place at this protest site, but still the atmosphere remained calm and peaceful. It was refreshing to see a strong sense of community among students—after all, for decades our city had been reputed to be apolitical (Lee 2019).

My only other experience with protesting had been while I was still a secondary school student, when I joined the crowd right outside my alma mater in Causeway Bay, where protesters were demonstrating against the introduction of the Chinese national education system in Hong Kong schools. We were advised by our school principal and teachers not to participate in political events such as this, especially while wearing our school uniforms. Showing our uniforms and faces in protests might harm the renowned reputation of the Catholic school, and we should not be spending our spare time doing anything other than studying and preparing for our upcoming public examination. Nonetheless, a few friends and I went to the protest, as we had gotten a day off from school and truly despised the idea of being forced

to undergo patriotic education in school. We sat in the occupied area together with hundreds of others, in solidarity with the student leaders who organised protests, public lectures, and hunger strikes and advocated against the proposed new school curriculum.

Similarly, when I participated in the Umbrella Movement two years later in 2014, I was sitting in solidarity with the protesters and contributing to the headcount. I was also observing and impressed by the order and aesthetics demonstrated through the different events that took place there; the art installations, posters on every kind of surface, handmade roadblocks made from random objects, the sense of community when protesters started singing and raising their phones with the flashlight function turned on when the sun went down. I went to the protest site in Admiralty a few times over the three-month period of the occupation, sometimes during the day and sometimes in the evening. Every time I went there, something new was happening, because the site and groups of participants were always changing. I walked on the freeway, I sang with the crowd, and I received yellow ribbons (signalling my support for the movement) from other participants. Only this time, as a university student, I had the freedom to participate in protests without having to worry about being photographed in my school uniform.

When the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement broke out in 2019, I was studying in Sweden, pursuing an MSc in Media and Communication Studies. As I was geographically located far away from the protests, I paid more attention to the activism that took place online. Over the course of the months of protest, I was exposed to countless digital protest art posts that my friends shared on their feeds and Instagram stories. I also saw videos of some of them participating in rallies and pictures they took when they walked past a Lennon Wall somewhere in the city. Although I was not in Hong Kong at the moment, there was still so much to keep up with on social media, through the lens and artworks of others. Eventually, I headed home for my summer break and witnessed first-hand the spread of Lennon Walls to every corner of the city. Although fundamentally political, these artistic productions highlighted the qualities of creativity, vibrancy, adaptivity, and multiculturalism of young activists and protesters. Unsurprisingly, these are the same qualities that Hong Kong offers, as an ever-changing, lively, multicultural city adored by many.

My experiences of these protests are obviously very limited and based on my standpoint. Nevertheless, the contributions and participation of fellow citizens in these social movements offer me the opportunity to explore the aesthetics and creative aspects of social movements, not only in Hong Kong but also viewed from a transnational perspective. The title ‘Civic Visuals in Hong Kong’ might seem ambitious, but both my personal and research interests are reflected in this thesis, which will delve into the subtle and ambiguous visual symbols in online civic and political discussions. I am grateful that many scholars in the field of media and communication studies have paved the way for research that embraces a cultural

perspective and studying political social movements 'from the ground up'. As media scholar David Gauntlett writes, in this field, the 'creative turn' entails contemplating both the creation and the creative uses of media and communications. What is more, as media and communication researchers, we should think creatively about the subject matter. With that in mind, this thesis approaches visual protest materials in Hong Kong (also drawing on examples from other parts of the world) as subtle expressions in the midst of a prominent period of political transition and change, in the hope of creating a better society—the kind of liberal society that we all deserve.

# Acknowledgements

To all the artists and individuals in Hong Kong and beyond who have and continue to contribute to creating and sharing these intriguing, creative, and simply inspiring illustrations, thank you. In the course of writing this thesis, I came to realise that what you have created and shared with the world is far bigger than what I assumed in the beginning.

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Cheryl Fung

Malmö, January 2026

# 1. Introduction

After developing for over two decades, digital activism is no longer viewed as a novel phenomenon in the research fields of media studies, sociology, and political science. Yet, its transformation is far from complete, as digital activism is inherently cyclical, continuously reinventing itself in response to technological shifts and sociopolitical development (Karatzogianni 2015). Today, visually driven social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have reshaped the landscape of digital activism, placing visual expression at the heart of contentious and civic actions. Images, both still and moving, have become crucial vehicles for sharing lived experiences, articulating dissent, and fostering solidarity, whether among close-knit communities or across global networks.

Visibility has been a keyword in academic discussions about the use of visuals in protests. In social movement studies, visuals are often understood as a communication tool to gain visibility and media attention, regardless of whether the production of the images was a strategic or unintended effort (McGarry et al. 2019:284). Following this logic, spectacular visuals—iconic images, viral posters, and highly recognisable symbols—tend to be the dominant focus in studies of images in activism (Philipps 2012; Olesen 2013; Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2015; Rovisco 2017). In contrast, quieter forms of civic resistance—those that eschew performance and virality—remain less explored. These expressions are often dismissed as politically insignificant, raising the question: why study forms of engagement that do not seek much attention?

This thesis challenges that assumption by foregrounding the arts of subtle resistance in contexts of social movement abeyance, heightened media censorship and digital surveillance. Drawing upon the empirical case of Hong Kong, where a National Security Law was enacted in 2020 to discourage expressions of dissident voices, it examines the evolvement of pro-democracy visual protest culture in recent years and explores the social significances of engagement surrounding this evolving form of visual civic talk on Instagram. By introducing the concept of *civic visuals*—artwork (primarily digital) that are characterised by their ambiguity, cultural nuance, playfulness, and emotional resonance rather than overt political expressions—this thesis explores how political discussions of contentious topics and remembrance of social movements can be sustained by—and help sustain—civic cultures.

Through a multimethod approach, this qualitative study investigates the engagement and meanings of civic visuals and their appropriated symbols. It argues that the power of civic visuals lies not only in confrontation, but in their capacity to navigate repression creatively and unobtrusively. The findings suggest how ordinary aesthetics, personal memories, collective nostalgia, humour, and play are key to invite and sustain discussions of contentious topics and remembrance of silenced voices within online civic communities in times of uncertainty and precarity. To understand the roles and significances of civic visuals, this thesis follows in the footsteps of media and cultural studies scholars, among them Mirzoeff (2009; 2015), Askanius (2013), and McGarry et al. (2019), who go beyond 'iconic' images and the spectacular in their research of civic engagement and activism, emphasising instead the mundane and everyday life aspects of resistance and civic participation.

In an era marked by a global trend of democratic backsliding (Carothers & Hartnett 2024) and increasing threats to free speech, ambiguous and subtle expressions offer alternative pathways for civic engagement. They transcend linguistic and geographic boundaries, enabling individuals to express dissent and solidarity with less risk of triggering censorship or retaliation. According to Scott, subordinate groups might feel compelled to conceal acts of resistance when they perceive a threat to their safety from authorities (1990:3). The greater the power disparity between the dominant authority and the powerless, the thicker the 'mask' becomes. In other words, the subtlety of an act of resistance reflects the arbitrariness of power imbalances. Subtle and disguised forms of expression become necessary tools for the less powerful to 'speak truth to the power', especially in (semi-) authoritarian contexts, and images have the capacity to inspire change. When art has an activist dimension, it can create space for individuals and communities to engage with issues on which they might otherwise have remained silent in times of crisis (Shipley & Moriuchi 2023:2-5).

By exploring online engagement with civic visuals on Instagram and using Hong Kong as a case study, this thesis introduces a conceptual discussion on how we can understand civic visuals and their significance in facilitating emotionally resonant yet subtle forms of resistance in broader socio-political contexts. Through a qualitative analysis of visual content and users' interactions on Instagram, this study presents how civic visuals can play a meaningful role in contributing to civic communities in times marked by instability and uncertainties, by embracing aesthetics, ambiguity, nostalgia, and playfulness in their expression.

# The emergence of visual activism in Hong Kong: A case study

Between fully democratic and undemocratic regimes lies a spectrum of governments that combine elements of both. These 'hybrid regimes', as they are commonly called, may uphold strong traditions of the rule of law or, conversely, exhibit more authoritarian characteristics (Tilly & Tarrow 2015:75). After the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The treaty grants Hong Kong the status of a Special Administrative Region (SAR), along with the political privileges and civil liberties that had been established under British rule over the previous years. Although it has retained certain civil liberties, an independent judiciary, and electoral politics, the Hong Kong government has always been under the supervision of an authoritarian sovereign (Cheng 2016:384). Hong Kong. Under the rule of a hybrid regime, Hong Kong has been governed according to the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems' since 1997. While the city enjoys a legally semi-autonomous status, the Chinese Central Government has been actively intervening in local politics. As a result, Hong Kong politics involve constant conflicts between central and local imperatives, with continuous mobilisation and countermobilisation carried out by protesters and the Chinese State respectively (Cheng 2019a:168-9).

## The Umbrella Movement

In September 2014, a civil disobedience campaign called 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' was launched by two university professors and a Baptist minister. By occupying Hong Kong's financial district, the campaign aimed to pressure Beijing into allowing genuine universal suffrage in 2017. What began as a planned protest soon escalated into a city-wide social movement that lasted for 79 days. The Umbrella Movement, also referred to as the Umbrella Revolution, emerged unexpectedly after student protesters spontaneously charged the Civic Square, a large open space in front of the Government Complex. This led to the arrest of student leaders and subsequently sparked one of the largest democratic movements in Hong Kong's history. The term Umbrella Movement was popularised following the publication of the October issue of the Asian edition of *TIME* magazine, which featured a cover story titled 'The Umbrella Revolution: Hong Kong's Fight for Freedom is a Challenge to China'. The magazine cover showed a photo of a protester holding two umbrellas while the police used tear gas to disperse them. It became one of the most iconic images of the movement and prompted the adoption of the name. The Umbrella Movement was described as the culmination of decades of frustration over the lack of progress in Hong Kong's democratic development. More specifically, peaceful protests and civic actions were increasingly regarded as

ineffective efforts, in keeping with the general trend of radicalisation in local movements (Ma 2019:27). This shift was particularly evident among members of the younger generation, who were developing a new political identity and determined to become more vocal and assertive in their political participation.

Unlike the Occupy Central campaign, the Umbrella Movement was completely unplanned (Chan & Chan 2017:142). It was mostly a student-led movement that favoured the absence of an official leader from a political party or social movement organisation. Young student leaders played a significant role in mobilising participants, while simultaneously distancing themselves from a position of leadership of the movement. This contributed to the formation of a non-hierarchical, networked structure. The decentralised approach significantly marginalised traditional political parties and established social movement organisations. As scholars posit, spontaneity was key in the process of this polycentric movement, with acts of civic resistance often emerging organically rather than through premediated planning (Cheng 2019b:63-4). The spontaneity enabled individuals within the network to contribute fluidly to both online and offline civil resistance, including by organising 'flexible classrooms' at protest sites and calling for users of social media platforms to show their support by changing their profile picture to the yellow umbrella symbol.

The Umbrella Movement also marked the city's first big wave of visual protests. Figure 1 shows a few examples from thousands of protest artworks that were created and shared during the movement. The umbrella symbol was often mobilised by protesters in forms of digital illustrations, art installations, graffiti, banners, or even as face paintings. In her cover story in *TIME*, journalist Hannah Beech (2014) describes how the umbrella is an unlikely protest symbol yet a perfect fit for a pro-democracy movement in urban Hong Kong:

> [The umbrellas come] in a riot of colours, matching a polyglot city that was birthed by quarrelling Eastern and Western parents, neither of which gave much thought to gifting democracy to a few hunks of South China Sea rock. Umbrellas are also a practical instrument, unsexy but vital, much like this financial hub that has long served as an entrepôt to the vast markets of mainland China.


**Figure 1**
The umbrella symbol in visual protest material. Source: Instagram

The images of protesters using only fragile umbrellas to shield themselves from tear gas deployed by riot police in full tactical gear had a striking visual impact on international audiences as they circulated across various digital platforms. For the social movement community, the yellow umbrella symbol suggests the imbalance of power between the government and its people. Between batons and foldable umbrellas, it is obvious that whoever is holding the latter has the lower hand in the battle. The umbrella represents resilience and creates an intangible foundation of strength that carries protesters through challenging moments. Another captivating visual characteristic of the umbrella is observed when viewing protest scenes from above, through drone footage. The gradual unfolding of umbrellas, one after another, resembles the blossoming of flowers. Hence, a frequently used phrase to depict the occurrence of small-scale protests in Hong Kong is '遍地開花' (pin3 dei6 hoi1 faa1), which literally translates to 'protests blossoming in every corner of the city'. Reflecting on the horizontal structure of the Umbrella Movement and its mobilisation of aesthetics as a strategy in strengthening the community and raising awareness, scholars suggest that perhaps even more than a leader, the people of Hong Kong were seeking a clear, unifying symbol to guide them (de Kloet 2017:158).

## The Anti-ELAB Movement

In June 2019, the largest social movement in Hong Kong's history broke out following the Government's announcement of the amendment of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Ordinance. Following the announcement in February, relatively small-scale protests were organised to urge for the withdrawal of the bill. However, initially, the Government made no move to suspend or withdraw the proposed extradition bill, which would allow Hong Kong citizens to be extradited to mainland China. Over the next few months, the number of protesters quickly grew. The first mass protest took place on the 9th of June that same year, when one million of Hong Kong's seven million inhabitants took to the streets to express their fear and concerns over the potential violation of the city's high degree of autonomy. On 12 June, 40,000 protesters attempted and succeeded in stalling the second reading of the bill at the Government Headquarters, kicking off a months-long, city-wide Anti-ELAB (Extradition Law Amendment Bill) movement. That afternoon, the protest descended into chaos and violent clashes when the police began to fire rubber bullets and teargas at protesters who were occupying roads in the central business district of Admiralty, where the Government Headquarters are also located. The chaotic scene was widely covered in both local and international media. Not only were the injuries of protesters shown on live TV, but images of the police confronting local and foreign journalists were also immediately widespread on social media. On 16 June, two million people marched through the streets in response to the police violence against protesters. The eventful protests of the following months were marked by both peaceful rallies and violent clashes between the authorities and protesters, resulting in a significant number of injuries. In September, the Government announced that it was suspending its consideration of the proposed bill indefinitely. Nonetheless, the protests continued and have since evolved into a broader movement that callss for political reforms including an independent inquiry into the police's abuse of power.

The Anti-ELAB Movement took visual protest in the city to a new level, this time with even more participants helping to create and share visual protest materials. The distribution of the visual materials was no longer limited to Lennon Walls, countless spontaneous installations sprouted in every imaginable corner of the city. Protesters posted colourful placards and stickers in a wide range of public spaces, from walls at bus stops, to billboards, to underground pathways and footbridges. The yellow umbrella remained a key visual protest symbol, displayed in different shapes and forms. Some protesters even flew a gigantic banner featuring the symbol and protest slogans from the top of the iconic city landmark, the Lion Rock. On popular social media platforms in Hong Kong, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram, self-organised 'publicity groups' of various sizes were formed by citizens to disseminate thousands of visual protest materials, through the creation of social media accounts as public distribution channels (Fung 2020; Frederiksen 2022; Lai et al. 2022).

## Through the pandemic and the enactment of the National Security Law

When the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly suspended protest activities due to the implementation of social distancing rules in early 2020, protesters shifted their focus to disseminating the latest information and statistics about the virus on their existing platforms (Whitworth & Li 2023:20). Both amateur and professional artists contributed by designing posters aimed at educating the public on preventive measures—sometimes even in contradiction of official government guidelines.[1] As a result, many citizens credited the movement's publicity groups, rather than the Government, for effectively minimising the spread of the virus in Hong Kong (Li 2020:676). The citizens' tireless efforts to share important information through visually engaging posts across platforms played a crucial role in demonstrating the community's resilience and solidarity in critical times.

With an agenda focused on enhancing national security, the National People's Congress in Beijing enacted a 66-article National Security Law (NSL) that came into effect on 30 June 2020. The NSL introduces four categories of national security offences, including secession, subversion, organisation and perpetration of terrorist activities, and collusion with a foreign country or external elements to endanger national security. However, the descriptions of the offences have been described by legal scholars as 'vague and sweeping', noting that an individual can be accused of committing the offence of succession through 'verbal and peaceful act without any action' (Chan 2022:8). In other words, the offences were so broadly defined that they could easily serve as 'catch-all' charges in politically motivated prosecutions (Bland 2020), potentially leading to severe penalties.

The enactment of the law further discouraged pro-democratic civic engagement, compounding the suspension of the Anti-ELAB Movement. Critics interpreted the new law as a direct threat to freedom of expression that would impact citizens' willingness to express their political views in both physical and digital spaces. This expression encompasses not only textual or verbal forms, but also the ones communicated by the means of visuals, such as illustrations and other protest materials. During this time, there was a noticeable shift from explicit criticisms to implicit, subtle expressions on visually driven social media platforms like Instagram. Many accounts that had actively shared visual protest materials during the movement were disappearing, and the meanings of political illustrations were becoming more ambiguous. This trend raises a critical question: Is this increasing ambiguity in political expression merely self-censorship to avoid 'crossing a red line', or could it also be considered a creative evolution of civic culture that requires

[1] The Government was against the use of masks in the beginning of the pandemic, opting initially to follow a newly enacted regulation prohibiting face coverings that targeted masked protesters. Despite the ban, from the very first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in Hong Kong on 23 January 2020, the community strongly encouraged citizens to wear face masks (Walline 2020).

contextualising socio-cultural factors to fully understand engagement with seemingly mundane and playful visual expressions in civic talk on social media?

## The afterlives of Hong Kong's visual protest culture

Following the dramatic development of the abovementioned movements, Pernin (2021) argues that Hong Kong's visual protest culture cannot be entirely erased, even now that the protests themselves have come to an end. She suggests that this culture will persist, preserved in collective memory, and circulated in disguised forms. In response to attempts at erasure, a new regime of visibility and new forms of expression are emerging. As Pernin suggests, the future protest visual culture of protest in Hong Kong will be characterised by forms of expression that are 'ephemeral, implicit, anonymous, de-territorialised, digitised and archived' (2021:106). While Pernin's focus is primarily on performance art, moving images, and physical artwork displayed on Lennon Walls, her insights into the evolving landscape of visual protest in the aftermath of the passage of the NSL offer a valuable entry point for this dissertation's exploration of ephemeral, implicit, anonymous, transnational, digitised, and archived visual materials in social media in Hong Kong.

## A case for understanding civic engagement in democratic abeyance

From an empirical point of view, studying digital content that is still yet to be completely wiped out will contribute to the study of the ongoing evolution of the civic and visual culture of Hong Kong. The future of the visual protest culture of the city lies in the emergence of subtler forms of expression. More importantly, digital platforms play a significant role in archiving the content and enabling research to be carried out in the wake of past social movements. This facilitates an investigation into how new forms of expressions might evolve from protest art, while access to material enables interesting and insightful findings that capture the transitions and development of the visual protest culture of Hong Kong from vibrant and expressive to subtle and opaque.

Previous studies suggest that in social movements, visual media play a crucial role in amplifying the visibility of associated protests. However, Pernin (2021) posed an important and curious question: What do we know about the afterlives of the visual protest culture when stricter censorship is imposed? Relatedly, when protest is restricted, what is the meaning of maintaining the circulation of these media and creating some sort of digital archives? What does appropriating a seemingly apolitical symbol in political discussion mean for the people, when showing a banner with a protest slogan is illegal?

The qualities of these appropriated representations—mundane, opaque, implicit, anonymous—are in significant contrast with political icons or logos. The subtlety of appropriated civic symbols creates ambiguity surrounding the intention of the political message, which is critical during a transitional period when people must navigate politically sensitive thresholds while staying engaged. In a constant process of navigation across contexts, the ambiguity of such symbols has an important function: to mask political intentions in visual expressions. On top of that, employing these symbols in interchangeable contexts also brings in the elements of fun, improvisation, and humour—elements that are cornerstones of sustained social movements (Shepard 2011:4).

While acknowledging how individuals and societies are deeply connected through and rely on images and other visual elements, this thesis has a strong focus on visual content as the primary empirical material. Since art historian and visual culture thinker W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) introduced the notion of a 'pictorial turn', there has been a growing recognition in academia of the importance of images, especially within the areas of visual culture and media studies. However, social scientists studying protest events or social movements have not shown enough interests in visual materials and methods, when compared to that of textual forms. While there are studies that focus on images and protest logos, Philipps argues that most studies tend to use the images as descriptions, rather than using theoretically embedded visual methods to explore their symbolic meanings (2012:4).

Furthermore, knowledge regarding political participation during the period of movement abeyance is less discussed in studies of protests or social movements, as most of them focus on the period in which social mobilization is at its peak (Fominaya 2015; Leong et al. 2019:174; Mattoni 2020:2380). In the case of Hong Kong, protests and other political activities have been put on hold following the implementation of the NSL. While the authorities have stopped granting protest permits to activist groups and civic organisations, these groups are also dissolving with activist leaders and movement participants being accused and prosecuted for threatening national security. As a result of a series of high-profile arrests of activists, lawmakers, journalists and dissidents, citizens have shown a greater level of fear in expressing their critical political opinions against the authorities, not only in public spaces but also on social media platforms (Mak et al. 2024).

This thesis shifts away from focusing on the civil resistance during peaks of the aforementioned movements, opting instead to examine online civic engagement as archived and practiced in post-NSL Hong Kong. As Lee et al. (2020) argue, understanding how movements are remembered in this period of abeyance is key to understanding their continuity. Social movement abeyance does not imply a static period when nothing happens. Instead, individuals and organisations are likely to explore possibilities for sustaining networks, resourcesm and identities by shifting towards cultural expressions (Taylor 1989; Valiente 2015; Lee 2025). As an increasingly popular medium by which to communicate citizens' and activists'

claims, social media content, conveniently yet haphazardly archived on various platforms, is therefore an interesting point of departure for researching into this shift in how viewpoints on civil and political issues are expressed.

In this thesis, I explore how seemingly mundane and playful artwork on Instagram—which I will refer to in this thesis as *civic visuals* – evolved from protest art, as a form of subtle engagement in political and civic talk online in Hong Kong.

# Positioning

There remains a need for situated research into the contemporary Hong Kong civic culture that emphasises the visuals and seemingly mundane expressions of civic engagement via social media. There is an existing body of research exploring notions of connective actions, mobilisation, political identity, networked movements, and media representation in social movements (Lee & Chan 2018; Lee et al. 2019; Tang & Chung 2022). Additionally, studies have analysed the affective dynamics created by the visual texts with which protesters have decorated public spaces (Liao 2022). However, few studies have taken a critical visual approach to the increasingly subtle and ambiguous forms of expression in social media. The evolving practices of citizens navigating their political discussions online in post-NSL Hong Kong remain underexplored.

Since 2020, civic engagement in Hong Kong has been drifting away from traditional civic actions, such as protests and boycotts, towards everyday resistance at the 'micro level' (Mak & Poon 2024:1113). Instead, creative and artistic forms political expressions remained present on social media platforms. Despite with uncertainties brought by various episodes of political development, artists have continued to express their opinions through their artwork. Oftentimes, their political opinions are communicated through creative appropriations of everyday, mundane symbols. Clearly, these discussions among citizens do not necessarily solve problems (Dahlgren 2009:88) or constitute direct political participation that may influence the Government and political choices at different levels of the political system (Milbrath & Goel 1977:2; Kaase & Marsh 1979:42). Rather, this civic-minded talk among members of communities who share political values can be understood as latent forms of political participation or civic engagement, with the potential to shape political engagement and promote civic agency (Dahlgren 2009:89; Ekman & Amnå 2012). Therefore, to shed light on how the public express their political opinions in this increasingly repressive environment, it is the author's belief that we need to focus more on understanding the meanings of everyday and the seemingly mundane practices and form of expression in depth.

The empirical focus on seemingly apolitical symbols (such as an apple) reflects how practices and forms of civic engagement evolve with the changing media and

political landscape. While studying iconic political and protest logos—like the rainbow flag for LGBTQ movements and the raised fist for the Black Lives Matter movements—helps us understand how successful movements are mobilised, I argue that focusing on subtle representations allows us to better understand how citizens remember and prolong civic participation once a movement is over. Thus, this study will also provide insight on how citizens navigate and adapt to forms of political expression that are more ambiguous and indirect.

To achieve this, I have conducted a qualitative study on visual civic engagement, with Instagram as the site of research, using a method inspired by digital ethnography and the unobtrusive, walkthrough method to identify subtle symbols used in visual expressions of dissent in the context of Hong Kong. This qualitative approach allows me to contextualise the civic visuals with embedded written texts and the cultural practices and expressions that are employed by users on the platforms. In visual research, contextualisation is key, as interpretations can be very different depending on the cultural, temporal, and political contexts. Rather than using images as mere descriptive tools, I will explore the underlying symbolic meaning of the civic visuals presented, through analytically driven and contextualised interpretations.

This thesis departs from theories and concepts from media and communication studies, particularly Peter Dahlgren's (2009; 2011) works on civic engagement and his analytical framework of civic culture, focusing instead on the investigation of the social significances of civic visuals. To explore the visual and aesthetic aspects of the phenomenon of visually driven civic and political expression, my conceptual framework also draws largely from John Dewey's (1934) aesthetic theories and Nicolas Mirzoeff's (2009) conceptual mapping of visual culture in the contemporary world, using them as a conceptual guide for approaching the nuances and aesthetics of mundane representations and expressions.

## Aims and research questions

Shifting from the focus on direct and explicit expressions of contention and dissent, this thesis aims to *examine the meaning and social significance of latent forms of political expressions and their aesthetic nuances from the perspective of civic cultures*. Specifically, I will explore the evolving practices of engaging in subtle forms of expression in civic conversations on Instagram in Hong Kong, particularly by means of civic visuals, during a period of time when political expressions in the city have become increasingly restricted. In achieving this aim, this thesis contributes to the scholarly discussion of ongoing and future development of civic engagement in relation to subtle visual protests in a changing media and political landscape, particularly in the contemporary context of Hong Kong, where digital

surveillance and political repression are growing after the implementation of the NSL.

To achieve its aim, this thesis answers the overarching research question: *How does pro-democracy visual protest culture evolve in an increasingly repressive environment, and what is its social significances*?

This question is guided and supplemented by the following set of three inter-related sub-questions:

1. What are civic visuals and how can they be interpreted as subtle forms of engagement on social media platforms from the perspective of civic cultures?
2. In what ways do civic visuals promote interactions and solidarity within civic communities, particularly through expressions of nostalgia and other emotions?
3. How are the games of politics imagined and expressed by citizens in civic visuals, through playful appropriations of political contexts?

## Civic visuals as an empirical focus

As Hong Kong's political landscape shifts, so does the character of visual protest circulating within its democratic struggles. Emerging from waves of civil disobedience, artistic and visual strategies do more than express political emotion—they invite audiences to imagine alternative futures in which transformation remains possible. Following the enactment of the NSL in 2020, there has been significant shift in the content and visual elements embedded in the artwork that continue to circulate on social media platforms, years after the protests ended. These artistic expressions have become less explicit in addressing political issue(s) and seeking for change; more often, they instead highlight aspects of cultural and aesthetic significances that represent the people, the community, and the city, region or country with which they are associated.

This thesis' focus on highlighting how visual material created and circulated during a specific period of movement abeyance transition from bold, direct, and explicit expressions to subtle, ambiguous and implicit representations. It calls for a more precise definition of the empirical material within the broader categories of activist art or political art—namely, civic visuals. This author has derived this term from the concept of civic engagement and extended it to intentionally emphasise the visual nature of the material. Civic engagement refers to voluntary actions performed by members of a community in order to participate in public life, often with the intention of contributing to the public good (Adler 2005 ; Zukin et al. 2006 ; Dalgren

2009). Civic visuals, by extension, should be understood as visual tools voluntarily produced by members of the civic communities with the aim of strengthening the community and promoting the public good. While civic visuals share many commonalities with activist and political art, particularly in how they are all 'socially involved' and their reliance on community collaboration, the latter two often explicitly convey the artist's stance on specific social or political issues (Lippard 1984:349; Shipley & Moriuchi 2018:3).

This author argues that civic visuals, in contrast, do not always show the intent or political stance of the artist directly, but rather subtly hint at it through depictions of one or more seemingly mundane symbols appropriated for the purposes of communicating about a certain event or issue. In addition to their ambiguous political intention, civic visuals are highly context-specific; the symbols or other visual elements of the content in question often refer to very specific events, individuals, or groups. This complicates the audience's process of contextualising and interpreting the images, as these processes and interpretations vary depending on the cultural, linguistic, political, and educational backgrounds of the people engaging with them. Paradoxically, as civic visuals can be seemingly apolitical, due to their ambiguous nature, the meanings of the image are often more open for interpretation , compared to activist and political art.

The evolving characteristics and development of visual protest material over time align with Tilly's concept of the repertoire of a social movement: the employment of combinations from different forms of political action, including public meetings, vigils, rallies, demonstrations and statements to the media (2004:3). As the political landscape evolves, so does the repertoire. Depending on the current landscape, political actors must employ contentious forms of performances or actions that are currently known and available to them (Tilly and Tarrow 2015:49). Different parts of the repertoires develop and change through continuous negotiations and interactions between political and social movement actors. Social scientists have shown interest in understanding the ritual of the repertoires on one hand, and their flexibility on the other (Tilly 1977, 2008; Li & Whitworth 2022:126). Hence, research that explores how artists and movement participants navigate, negotiate, and adapt to new forms of artistic expression under increasing social surveillance will add to the wider understanding of contentious actions in from a media and cultural perspective.

# Disposition

This monograph thesis is structured as follows: The next chapter, Chapter 2, gives an overview of the evolving political and media landscapes in Hong Kong. It opens with a discussion on major developments in the political landscape by exploring the

meaning of citizenship in Hong Kong and the city's dramatic decline in freedom according to international reports. This is followed by a summary of contentious episodes over the years. The chapter ends with an examination on shifts in the media landscape through the lens of media and communication studies, reflecting on Dahlgren's (2009) analysis of key media development, using Hong Kong as a case study. Chapter 3 presents a literature review in which I discuss existing literature and previous studies on civic engagement, visual protest, remembrance, and play in social movements. Chapter 4 presents a conceptual framework that is founded on the works of pragmatic theorist John Dewey and media scholar Peter Dahlgren. The first part of the chapter will discuss Dewey's aesthetic theories that approach art as experience, followed by a discussion of Dahlgren's notion of civic cultures in an evolving media environment. Chapter 5 outlines this thesis' methodological approaches to understanding civic visuals, with a detailed description of the research design. It begins with the explanation of how an Instagram walkthrough was conducted for data collection and the specifics of using iconography as a sampling approach in this process, followed by an ethical reflection on the chosen methods. Then, I elaborate on the analytical approaches by providing the overview of the visual material and details of step-by-step qualitative thematic content analysis and iconological analysis. Chapter 6 presents findings from the analysis of one of the most prominent symbols in the dataset: the apple. This appropriated symbol from a logo of a local pro-democracy newspaper carries nuanced meanings for the citizens in Hong Kong and has been seen as a symbol of media censorship in the aftermath of the implementation of NSL. By examining visual materials produced before, during and after the shutdown of *Apple Daily*, I highlight the significant role that ambiguity plays in allowing artists and citizens to navigate their discussions surrounding contentious socio-political issues, while simultaneously facilitating civic engagement in times of change and uncertainty. This chapter underlines how engagement with a particular civic symbol evolves over the years, in tandem with political development. Chapter 7 sheds light on the spontaneity of political events and engagement with civic visuals, focusing on the unpremeditated appropriation of a cultural and nostalgic icon in Hong Kong: the Life Bread (hereinafter referred to generally as 'white bread') as a symbol of resistance. In comparison with the apple, this was a rather short-lived symbol. Hence, the time aspect becomes less salient. By engaging with concepts of aesthetics in everyday life, identities, and nostalgia, I examine how citizens integrate culture indirectly, address issues of political repression through depictions of everyday life, and shared cultural experiences, and nostalgia. Chapter 8 takes a broader perspective than the previous analytical chapters, shifting the focus from individual symbols to the investigation of a recurring theme across the empirical material: civic visuals as a form of playful resistance. It examines the common practice among artists of using game metaphors to address contentious political issues, highlighting how playful representation motivates and invites citizens to discuss topics that are otherwise challenging to comment on openly. Chapter 9 synthesizes the findings from all the analytical

chapters and addresses the research questions through empirical and theoretical insights. It provides an overview of the contributions of this research, discusses its limitations, and concludes the dissertation.

# 2. The Evolving Political and Media Landscape in Hong Kong

Located on the southeastern coast of China, Hong Kong was a small fishing village for many years before becoming a British colony in the 19th century. Today, it is known as a financial hub and one of the most densely populated metropolises in the world. For a city of a comparable size to Öland in Sweden, Hong Kong has a remarkably large population of 7.35 million people. From 1841 until 1997, the city was a colony of the British Empire and later a dependent territory of the United Kingdom. Prior to the 1997 handover, Hong Kong had never been governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was established during the colonial era. As a result, the handover sparked contrasting views; some saw it as a long-awaited reunification with the motherland, while others perceived it as a mere shift from one colonial power to another.

Situated strategically at the heart of the Far East trade route and centrally positioned centrally in Asia, Hong Kong has maintained its status as one of the world's busiest container ports since the 1970s. Its location not only positions Hong Kong as a major business hub in Asia, but also means that it serves as a gateway for China to the world and vice versa. This role is also supported by the plurality in Hong Kong's linguistic landscape. While the local population speaks Cantonese as their first language, English serves as the prominent language in government, business, and educational domains (Wang & Kirkpatrick 2015), resulting in convenience for international business growth among local and foreign businesses, specifically during the earlier stages of globalisation.

It is against this background that Hong Kong's citizens have been governed under a hybrid political regime since the 1997 handover. Shaped by the city's colonial history, its trajectory of political development, and complex cultural identities of its citizens, Hong Kong's political and media landscape has evolved in distinctive ways. The following portion of this chapter further explores these landscapes through two topics of discussion. The first half aims to contextualise and summarise major developments in Hong Kong's political landscape by exploring the meaning of citizenship in Hong Kong, the recent decline in freedom there, and contentious episodes that have occurred there over the years. This is done by discussing the existing literature in the field of Hong Kong studies and recent international reports. The second half discusses recent shifts in Hong Kong's media landscape through

the lens of media and communication studies, via reflection on Dahlgren's analysis of key developments in the broader media domain in late modern society (2009:35).

## Citizenship in Hong Kong

Ways of understanding citizenship vary across temporal and cultural contexts are often influenced by political philosophies (Dahlgren 2009:57). Still, notions of citizenship typically acknowledge that it is characterised by ambiguities and tensions, especially in terms of its purposes of providing a legal status and indicating membership of a community (Leung 2004:97-8). In Hong Kong, citizenship never implied a national identity, neither during the colonial era nor even after the handover. Ku and Pun (2004) posit that the formation of citizenship in Hong Kong is an embodiment of a distinctive colonial history spanning over one hundred and fifty years under the rule of a colonial government. Throughout this period, the people of Hong Kong have never been granted the basic rights typically afforded to citizens. Under colonial government, the idea of citizenship was mainly used for the purpose of moulding the people of Hong Kong into law-abiding residents (Ku & Pun 2004:3). Discussions about Hong Kong citizenship as a concept that went beyond its role as a colonial subject did not arise until the 1970s. During the final stages of the transfer of the city's sovereignty, grassroots protest groups pioneered the concept of Hong Kong citizenship as resistance against the sovereignty transfer grew (Wu 2019:236).

For these reasons, for many people in Hong Kong, citizenship has never been entirely tied to a national identity. Most residents were neither full citizens of the British Empire nor did they actively identify as Chinese citizens. In the past, people were mostly classified as 'British subjects/overseas nationals'. Even today, although they are nationals of the PRC, many primarily identify themselves as Hong Kong citizens, rather than Chinese nationals. Despite the development of local identity and the Chinese government's ongoing effort to reshape citizenship into a more nationalistic civic identity (Ku & Pun 2004:1-2), here one identity remains most prominent: that of the Hongkonger. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong, 53% of respondents identified themselves as 'Hongkongers', 11% as 'Chinese', 12% as 'Chinese in Hong Kong' and 23% as 'Hongkongers in China', suggesting that 76% of Hong Kong residents broadly considered themselves to be first and foremost Hongkongers (HKU POP 2019).

While this strong identification is likely a result of the pro-democracy protests of the past decade, promoting recognition of a distinct Hongkonger identity has been a key agenda item in the youth political movement since the early 2010s. In 2014, Hong Kong saw a rise in anti-mainland China sentiment and protests, during which

time the Hongkonger identity was championed by localists. That same year, many celebrated online when Oxford University Press added the terms 'Hongkonger' and 'Hong Kongese' to the Oxford Dictionary. The local English-language newspaper *South China Morning Post* commented on this victory, stating that 'Hongkongers are finally being recognised on the world stage' (SCMP 2014).

Nonetheless, identifying oneself as a Hongkonger can be controversial in post-NSL Hong Kong. In this increasingly polarised political environment, even companies have begun to self-censor related terms in promotional materials or at public events. For example, in 2021, a marathon organiser prohibited runners from wearing clothing with the phrase 'Hong Kong add oil', which means 'keep it up'. Although the phrase seems fitting as a cheer slogan at a marathon, in the aftermath of the Anti-ELAB Movement. Both it and the term 'Hongkonger' are largely regarded as political statements. Regarding this development of the Hongkonger identity, Mak & Poon argue that identifying as a Hongkonger has become a sign of resistance in post-movement Hong Kong (2024:1115). The sustaining of this identity is a concerted effort to preserve the core and democratic values shared among those who see themselves as Hongkongers, according to the scholars (ibid.).

## Hong Kong: A partly free region

According to Freedom House's (2025) *Freedom in the World 2025* report, global freedom declined for the nineteenth consecutive year. Notably, Hong Kong was classified as a 'partly free' territory, receiving a combined score of 40 out of 100 in terms of political rights and civil liberties. The report also highlights Hong Kong as one of the countries/territories in the world with the most dramatic decline in freedom within the last ten years. From the local to the global level, this trend of democratic backsliding is deeply concerning. Additionally, the increasingly aggressive stance of governments—both in Hong Kong and worldwide—towards dissent and protests, along with the growing adoption of stricter forms of policing and surveillance (Tilly & Tarrow 2015:xi), further intensifies concerns about the state of liberal democracy from a global perspective.

At the beginning of the 2000s, besides emerging as one of the world's prominent financial centres, Hong Kong was in the lead among Asian regions and countries in terms of freedom of the press, as highlighted in the first report published by the Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2002). However, according to the Democracy Reports published by the University of Gothenburg over the past three years, democracy in Hong Kong has significantly deteriorated since 2012 (V-Dem 2023; 2024; 2025). The reports highlight Hong Kong as one of the places experiencing increased government censorship, with academic freedom, press freedom, and cultural expression being progressively restricted. In a summary of the situation in post-NSL Hong Kong, Davis highlights serious concerns over Beijing's repression

of basic freedoms in the city and how the new law has negatively impacted the media, academia and judicial independence, and the civil society:

> In the months since [the enactment of NSL], nearly the entire pandemocratic opposition in Hong Kong has been arrested or has fled into exile. Opposition organisations of all stripes have been shuttered. The press and the universities have largely been cowed into silence. The courts and the legal profession are under attack. Hong Kong has now become a place where those who speak out against such draconian measures await the midnight knock (Davis 2022:100).

The decline in press freedom in Hong Kong is also evident in its global ranking, which significantly fell from 18th place in 2002 to 135th place in 2024, according to the Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2024a). As regards this worrying trend, RSF notes that Hong Kong, 'once a bastion of press freedom', has faced an unprecedented series of setbacks since 2020, following the adoption of the NSL by Beijing, which aims to silence independent voices (ibid.).

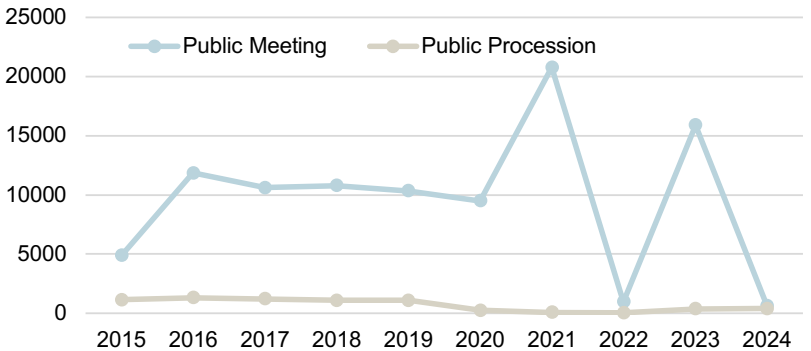
## Contentious episodes over the years

Hong Kong has been described as a 'protest society' (Lee 2014; Garrett 2015) or 'a city of protest' (Chen 2017; Rühlig 2020; Chiu & Siu 2022) due to its decades-old vibrant protest culture. Butenhoff (1999:25) refers to the 1970s as the 'Golden Age' of social movements in Hong Kong, a time when social conflicts frequently arose over the colonial government's slow process of improving housing, transport, and education (Chen 2009). Before the handover, two of the largest protests in Hong Kong's history took place, including the city's first-ever large-scale riots in 1967. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China and fuelled by resentment of colonial rule, radical leftists organised violent disturbances and confronted the colonial government with bombs, a conflict that lasted for about six months, resulting in 51 deaths, and the conviction of over 1,900 people (Cheung 2009:3). Despite critical losses and casualties, the riots have prompted the colonial administration to introduce beneficial education and labour reforms, while simultaneously strengthening a sense of belonging among younger Hong Kong citizens (Cheung 2009:5). Another series of massive rallies took place in June 1989. Triggered by Beijing's suppression of student protesters in Tiananmen Square on the 4th of June, nearly one million people in Hong Kong participated in demonstrations to show support for the students. The peaceful demonstrations in 1989 built the foundation for the annual vigil that took place at Victoria Park on the 4th of June since 1980, with tens of thousands of participants joining every year. This annual event was suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and permanently cancelled when members of the organisation that arranged it were convicted under the NSL.

For about two decades after the handover, Hong Kong was regarded as the only place under China's governance in which multi-party democratic elections and

open protests could still take place (Garrett 2013:57). It is commonly accepted that Hong Kong's protest cycle took off in 2003, marked by the participation of half a million citizens in a march held on 1 July 2003,[2] in opposition of the then upcoming national security legislation. That protest successfully postponed the legislation and started an annual tradition of protests held on 1 July, in which groups and parties that advocate for issues regarding education, public finance, public health, labour and so on participate. Since the cycle of protest began in Hong Kong, numerous ups and downs have been observed throughout the years (Lee & Chan 2018; Kitschelt 1993, Mueller 1999; Tarrow 1989). In 2020, one year after the Anti-ELAB Movement, the number of protest activities has reached a new low point, with a significant decrease in public order incidents documented by the police.[3] Table 1 shows the statistics of public meetings and public processions[4] from 2013 to 2022, according to police statistics. While not every one of these events constitutes a protest, it is reasonable to assume that a considerable proportion of rallies and marches involve protests of some kind (Lee & Chan 2018:27).

**Table 1.**
Number of public order incidents in Hong Kong, 2015-2024. Source: Hong Kong Police.




According to the official statistics, the number of public processions remains relatively consistent, at approximately 1,000 per year, until the year of 2020. Subsequently, there is a sudden decline to 252 in 2020, followed by further decreases to 76 in 2021 and 41 in 2022. In contrast, the number of public meetings

[2] The Establishment Day of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

[3] The public order incidents statistics are published by the Hong Kong Police Force and can be accessed at https://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/09_statistics/poes.html. Accessed on 21 September, 2025.

[4] According to the Public Order Ordinance (CAP245), public meetings refer to 'any meeting held or to be held in a public place' while a public procession means 'any procession in, to, or from a public place'.

experienced a substantial increase, rising from 4,987 in 2013 to a peak of 20,783 in 2021. However, in keeping with the trend observed for public processions, the number of public meetings also reached a new low of 963 in 2022. Assumably, the decline in public events in 2020 was closely tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing rules were strictly imposed. However, the notable decrease in overall public events from 20,859 in 2021 to 1,004 in 2022 is arguably the result of the implementation of the NSL. Still, a more extensive analysis is needed to provide a detailed explanation. Specifically, it is notable that the police did not issue a single 'letter of no objection'—a document that serves as a permit for all forms of public marches and rallies—from 2020 to 2023, as reported by *Ming Pao* (2023).

Interestingly, the number of public meetings significantly increased in 2023, with over 15,892 public meetings and 382 public processions approved by the authorities. These figures suggest that certain forms of public gatherings and civic actions received government permission, in contrast to previous years. However, these statistics have sparked controversy, as every key annual protest event—such as the Labour Day rallies, the women's rights march on International Women's Day and Pride Parade —was cancelled. The only exception was a small protest against a local development project, at which all protesters had to identify themselves by wearing a badge. Regarding the categorisation of these public events, the Government has stated that the statistics do not distinguish between a rally and a festival parade, according to online news media *On.cc* (2024). This creates difficulties and complexities for the public to understand the nature of these public gatherings,

Ideally, these statistics serves to illustrate how frequently public meetings or processions occurred in Hong Kong, offering insights into the city's protest practices and culture (Tang & Chung 2022). However, since the enactment of NSL in 2020, these figures may no longer truthfully reflect the reality of civic participation. This is because official statistics may no longer be reliable, as the numbers are likely inflated by uncontentious events such as charity walks and festival parades, while actual rallies and marches are prohibited (HK Labour Rights Monitor 2024).

## The evolving media landscape

Communication among citizens should be central to theories of democracy, as these interactions constitute not only citizens' expressions of their participation in civil society, but also a fundamental element to their participation (Dahlgren 2002:6). The media is transforming democracy globally, as all matters political are now significantly situated within the media spectacle (Dahlgren 2009:35). The logic and interplays between stakeholders in the media landscape shape and empower discussions among citizens, influencing not only the topics discussed but also where

and how these conversations take place. Still, the media landscape is constantly changing in response to the influences of different sociocultural developments. The political economy of media involves powerful businesses and politicians. They frequently shaping opinions and managing their images through various forms and channels of media, resulting in constant changes to the media landscape.

Within the Western media landscape, Dahlgren (2009:35) identifies five key developments that have been constitutional for the evolvement in the 2000s, proliferation, concentration, deregulation, globalisation, and digitalisation: *Proliferation* regarding the increasing number of channels, media forms and genres*; concentration* in terms of the domination of megacorporations in modern mediascape; *deregulation* as process of withdrawing policies to open doors in media ownership; *globalisation* in the sense of expanding citizen's global frames and social engagement with multi-dimensional and complex implications; *digitalisation* in the context of the exponential growth of digital media platforms and the migration of several media forms from offline to online.

Under these transformations, the modern media landscape, as earlier described, is characterised by political, economic, and cultural turbulences. Although Dahlgren's analysis is based on Western media development, it applies to the situation in Hong Kong to a large extent. In the 1990s, the last British governor of Hong Kong introduced a 'reformist' model to promote the media's role as a government watchdog after signing the Sino-British Joint Declaration with China, as an effort to improve government-media relations, which were characterised by 'little-used' repressive press laws (Lee & Chu 1995; Clarke 2002:45). This has resulted in the news media becoming more active and opinionated, alongside a vibrant expansion of the media market (Clarke 2002:45). From 1993-1995, Hong Kong witnessed the establishment of pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily,* and the acquisitions of two major news outlets—*South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao*—by foreign tycoons.

Within a few years after the handover, there was a notable shift of media ownership from media practitioners to businessmen. From a political economy perspective, Lee argues that these acquisitions were driven by the presumption that being a media owner in Hong Kong is a means by which resourceful businesses can gain social and political capital in mainland China; he underlines how, by the mid 2000s, the majority of media organisations in Hong Kong were dominated by businessmen (2018:10). Lee further illustrates this beneficial relationship between the media and political power by listing fifteen formal titles received by media shareholders and executives since 1998 (ibid.). These titles include exclusive membership in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress, along with such actors being honoured with the highest political awards under the Hong Kong honours and awards systems, namely the Grand Bauhinia Medal and the Gold Bauhinia Star.

By understanding how media ownership in post-colonial Hong Kong was partly motivated by business and political interests in the Greater China area, we can identify close ties between certain influential media organisations and the Government. The business-oriented media environment and political economic system also give rise to internal tensions. These tensions stem from years of resistance by media practitioners and journalists who, unlike most owners of media outlets, are actively involved in the day-to-day operations of newsrooms. In Lee's views, journalists' efforts to ensure the delivery of accurate information and to serve the public interest helped to sustain the relative autonomy of the Hong Kong media system for decades (2018:9). On top of the shifts in media ownership and the tensions between media stakeholders, the deterioration of the media business environment and the rise of digital media also marked some of the turbulent transitions in the Hong Kong mediascape at the beginning of the 2010s (ibid.), mirroring the evolution of the Western media landscape in the late 2000s (Dahlgren 2009:35).

The increasing political pressure imposed on media practitioners as the Chinese state's tolerance for critical and in-depth reporting of sensitive topics has led Hong Kong media owners to leave the scene, only to subsequently be replaced by Chinese capital (Lee 2018:14). At the same time, digitalisation has extensively shifted media consumption in Hong Kong. Digital media have been increasingly dominant as the primary news sources ever since the 2010s. In 2024, online media, including social media, was the main news source for 83% of respondents in Hong Kong (Thomala 2024). Among these media platforms, YouTube and Facebook are the most popular means for which Hong Kong citizens obtain news. The shift of media consumption from conventional media channels to digital channels also have given rise not only to social media pages that are dedicated to disseminating information, but also to alternative media defined as 'media production that challenges' (Couldry and Curran 2003:7). In the beginning of the 21st century, more media scholars directed their attention towards alternative media, which was then a neglected field in media studies. In response to the increasing use of alternative media by activists and non-commercial groups around the world, and in an effort to counter the hegemonic discourse and biased portrayals of protest in mainstream media (Atkinson 2005:78), there has also been a rapid expansion of alternative far-right media across countries, including in Sweden (Askanius 2021:149). Consequently, in recent years, more research has come to focus on examining the roles of alternative media in social movement participation. In the Hong Kong context, there has also been a great deal of scholarly attention on the alternative media and its role in stimulating participation and collective actions (Chan 2017; Shen et al. 2019). Altogether, the mainstream media, alternative media, and social media constitute the contemporary media landscape in Hong Kong today.

Returning to democracy and media: Within the framework of civic cultures, the nature and the role of media are important elements in shaping the character of

democracy (Dahlgren 2009:34). Particularly in understanding the role of media in democracy, we should not view developments within the media landscape as individual events, rather, as interwoven processes. In the following section, I present an overview of the development of Hong Kong's media landscape. Building on Dahlgren's discussion of developments in the Western mediascape (2009:35-41), I identify three more key developments in the case of Hong Kong, allowing for a more nuanced and timely discussion of the entanglement between various kinds of development. First, I will briefly address the changes in Hong Kong's media landscape in relation to concentration. I will then elaborate on the more contemporary and context-specific changes identified through recent research and media reports: censorship and surveillance, visualising media homogeneity, and the rise of diasporic media.

## Concentration

Dahlgren's notion of concentration centres on how massive media companies acquire smaller outlets through mergers and acquisitions over years of global expansion. He suggests that this concentration of media ownership possesses a danger to democracy, as these megacorporations often value private profit over public responsibility (Dahlgren 2009:36). While a lot of small media companies are owned or backed by large corporations, this author would like to take a different approach to addressing the processes of concentration within the media landscape. This approach does not seek to ignore the impacts brought by mergers between private companies in shaping the media landscape, but to highlight the gradual disappearance of independent voices in mainstream media. Due to the influence of increasing regulation of the press, audiences can only see aligned, conformed opinions in mainstream media. To underline this obvious concentration of power and control observed in the changing media landscape in Hong Kong, I discuss concentration specifically in reference to the process of concentrating power and resources to produce and control media content across mainstream media and social media channels.

One way to look at this process is through the development of Hong Kong's first broadcasting service over the last few years. Founded in 1928, government-funded Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) has produced a lot of critical content in the past, raising awareness of different social and political issues. For many years, the broadcaster was committed to maintaining editorial independence from the Government, while retaining a high degree of credibility (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2022) and a reputation for broadcasting quality programmes that address controversial current affairs both in mainland China and Hong Kong. However, over the past years, RTHK has faced criticism from pro-Government groups, who accuse it of bias. Prior to its expansion in 2016 to include three digital broadcasting channels and two analogue signal channels, the

broadcasting of RTHK's productions was heavily relied on other television channels. Until March 2020, television broadcasters in Hong Kong that hold free TV licences were required to air RTHK programmes. One year later, the Hong Kong Government published a report claiming that the broadcaster and its management had 'not actively sought advice from the Board of Advisors on matters pertaining to editorial principles, programming standards and programming quality', and that its 'handling of editorial complaints lacks transparency and objectivity' (Commerce and Economic Development Bureau 2021). The report recommends that RTHK involve independent reviewers (internal or external) to routinely evaluate the standards and quality of its programme. It also advises establishing a more proactive and collaborative partnership with the Board of Advisors, who are appointed by the CE. The then Director of Broadcasting announced his departure from the broadcaster the same day, and he was succeeded by a former Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs who had no background in broadcasting. In his first month in charge of RTHK, the new director cancelled episodes of the award-winning investigative documentary programme *Hong Kong Connection* and announced that the broadcaster would withdraw its submissions to local and international journalism awards competitions, including the Human Rights Press Awards. Within two months, at least six senior editorial staff members at RTHK resigned (Mok 2021).

Increasing regulation to control content produced by RTHK can be observed in the case of another flagship show, *Headliner*. It was a weekly satirical news round-up programme that aired for over 30 years (since 1989), only for production to be suspended in 2020 after receiving a warning from the Communications Authority (CA) for denigrating the police force in one of its skits. However, the Hong Kong Journalists Association and the RTHK Staff Union jointly initiated a judicial review against the CA, resulting in the warning being overturned by the High Court in 2021. Upon an appeal submitted by the CA, the warning was later dismissed by the Court of Appeal in September 2024. The judge noted that while there were insults directed at the police, satirical or not, they targeted the police's performance and not their social status, and hence the broadcaster had not breached the code (Leung 2024).

These recent changes around management and production of RTHK are prominent examples of how power from outside the media sector is now making important decisions not only for media organisations, but also from within. With this said, this concentration of power in the media system applies to both public and private media companies. Next, I will further elaborate on how the growing concentration of power and resources within Hong Kong's media landscape has been reinforced, and in many ways enabled, by other significant structural shifts, most notably the substantial decline in media plurality.

During the 2000s, the Western mediascape experienced significant deregulation, as policy shifts aimed to broaden opportunities for media ownership and foster plurality (Dahlgren 2009:35). Still, these reforms did little to prevent what Dahlgren describes as the 'twilight of journalism' in the West at the turn of the decade

(2009:41-8). This pessimistic view on journalism's declining institutional strength was not confined to Western contexts. The increasingly distressed press, fragmentation, and mobilisation of media audiences, tabloidisation of news, and disconnected citizens are observable trends in East Asian countries including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Referring to the RSF's reports once again, journalism in these countries is burdened with polarised media environments driven by sensationalism and business interests (RSF 2024b).

Following the enactment of the NSL in 2020, authorities targeted several independent pro-democracy media companies and their executives, charging them with fraud and collusion with foreign forces (Lee & Chan 2023:922). Many journalists view this development as a sign that Hong Kong is no longer a bastion of press freedom (Laplana 2024), contrasting with its previous reputation as having the 'freest presses' in East Asia (Lent 1981:148). In addition, Hong Kong authorities have openly exerted pressure on media organisations to alter editorial content and remove material critical of the Government, resulting in a growing trend of self-censorship (Pak 2024).

One of the most direct and impactful consequences of increasing press control was the closure of Hong Kong's largest pro-democracy newspaper, *Apple Daily*. Following the arrests of its owner and executives, the newsroom was raided by 500 police officers on 10 August 2020. Jimmy Lai, a pro-democracy activist and the newspaper's owner, was accused of violating the NSL. The executives of the news outlet were also charged with fraud and accused of violating land-lease terms regarding the use of office space (Davidson 2020). According to news reports, Lai was convicted on 15 December 2025 of two counts of conspiring to commit collusion with foreign forces and one count of sedition under colonial-era legislation (HKFP 2025b). Prior to receiving the verdict, Lai had already been jailed for more than 1,800 days.[5]

Following the cessation of operations at *Apple Daily*, several independent news outlets and alternative media channels have either been forced to shut down or have suspended production. According to *InMedia* (2022), a total number of six online news media outlets ceased operations in the aftermath of the shutdown of *Apple Daily*, along with the independent media organisation *Stand News*. Table 2 summarises four notable closures.

[5] As of the time of writing (19 January 2026), Lai is awaiting sentencing and faces a potential prison term of at least 10 years to life imprisonment.

**Table 2.**
Notable media outlets that have ceased operation since the enactment of the NSL, summarised by the author.

| Type | Name | Year of operation | Number of staff | Founder(s) | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mainstream media** | *Apple Daily* | 1995-2021 | 800 | Jimmy Lai, businessman | Forced to shut down in 2021. Founder and owner found guity on national security charges in 2025 |
| | *Stand News* | 2014-2022 | 60 | Tony Tsoi, writter and businessman | Newsroom raided by national security police in 2021. The founder has been in exile since 2021 and the editor-in-chiefs were jailed in 2024 for publishing and reproducting seditious publications. |
| **Alternative media** | *Citizens News* | 2017-2022 | 40 | 10 journalists and journalism scolars | Announced that it was ceasing operations due to concerns for staff safety |
| | *Post 852* | 2013-2021 | 6 | Yau Ching Yuen, former editor at the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* | Announced the suspension of production due to concerns for staff safety |

In terms of size and staffing, the closure of *Stand News* might not seem to be as impactful as *Apple Daily*. Nevertheless, the targeting of an independent, alternative, and online-only media channel by the authorities reinforces the popular assumption that, despite having more limited resources than mainstream media companies, due to the development of digitalisation, smaller media organisations can be highly influential in terms of their reach and engagement. With this in mind, alternative media can challenge central concentration of media resources, and therefore their production should not be overlooked (Couldry & Curran 2003:7). As media scholars argue, alternative media plays a significant role in visualising the contestation of media power, serving as a symbolic power that allows one to influence events and actions by means of production (Thompson 1995:17; Couldry & Curran 2003:1).To illustrate this point in the Hong Kong context, it is crucial to discuss the case of *Stand News*.

Established in 2014 as a successor of former *House News*, *Stand News* was ranked as the most credible of all media outlets in Hong Kong (paid newspaper, free newspaper, online news media) before being shut down in 2021, according to a public evaluation on media credibility conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2019). The non-profit outlet emerged as one of the most reliable news sources for online audiences during

the anti-extradition protests. As their frontline reporters began livestreaming from various protest sites, providing first-hand information on their online platforms and uploading an estimated total of 2,787 livestreams during the course of the social movement (HKFP 2022), *Stand News* attracted the attention of both citizens and the authorities. After months of reporting live from the conflict-filled and chaotic scenes of the protests, journalists came under increasing fire from the authorities, often being accused of biased reporting. During a livestream in December 2019, the police asked a *Stand News* reporter to undergo an identity check. Upon receiving the reporter's ID card, the police officer displayed the document to the camera that was running the livestream. The reported claimed that this action constituted a violation of Hong Kong's personal data ordinance, as his full name, photo and date of birth were shown to the live audience. Ironically, while the police showed no consideration for the privacy rights of journalists during this incident, the officer who flashed the ID card on camera had half of his face covered with a black neck gaiter.

Conflicts as such have set the scene for the independent media to be targeted in the events of media regulation in post-NSL Hong Kong. Described as a salient example of a combination of professional and citizen journalism (Tse & Spiezio 2024:2), *Stand News* remained opinionated and outspoken regarding government policies and press freedom even as it struggled to access resources. Such opinions were interpreted by the Government as demonising its authority (HKFP 2022a), and this eventually led to a raid of the publication's office by 200 police officers and the arrest of senior staff members (BBC News 2021). In commenting on the closure of the news outlet, John Lee, the then Chief Secretary and now CE of the SAR Government, publicly referred it as 'bad apples' and 'evil elements' from which other media practitioners should distance themselves (HKFP 2022b). He went further by shifting the responsibility for the deteriorating press environment onto independent media, portraying such outlets as the culprits 'polluting and damaging press freedom' (ibid.).

When *Stand News* and *Apple Daily* ceased their operations, their millions Hong Kong Dollars assets were simultaneously frozen by the authorities. This indicates how private capitals and media resources, even that of a non-profit organisation, can be seized overnight. Althoug the idea of concentration within the media environment typically refers to cross-ownership and mergers, these eventful developments in Hong Kong offer insights in understanding how concentration in media ownership and resources can be achieved in a more restrictive political context, by means of regulation and punishment.

## Visualising media homogeneity

News visualisation, with the use of infographics to illustrate complex political issues and events, is an expanding genre of news storytelling, as audiences generally

appreciate visual and aesthetic elements that allow them to grasp complicated current affairs more easily (Haan et al. 2018:1294). As we are living in a visual world (Howell & Negreiros 2019:1), visual forms of storytelling are motivated by both our lifestyles and the media environments that surrounds us with images. While younger audiences are gradually turning away from text-based news media and becoming more reliant on visual-based media, they must also have sufficient knowledge and visual literacy to understand the news they consume (Howells and Negreiros 2019:2).

Traditionally, news media outlets employ a wide range of information visualisation tools, including graphics and vectors, to deconstruct the complex developments of a news story, the complications of the stock market, real-time traffic information and so on. In the digital age, this is particularly visible on online news sources including social media platforms. As the most popular source of news for Hongkongers in 2025 (Chan, Lee & Chen 2025), many online news platforms are designed with an interface that show all the content in forms of thumbnails. A single graph or image is often selected to represent—or to give the first impression of—an entire story before the audience clicks on the thumbnail to read or see more about it. Reducing an entire story or event to a single image is one of the two paradoxical principles of information visualisation. The first one is to preserve all the details of the original artefact, and the second is to abstract its structure completely (Manovich 2011:42). While visualisation can reveal patterns and structures that simplifies complicated processes and developments for easier understanding, there are also risks associated with using visualisation for the public representation of cultural artefacts and processes. As Manovich posits, when 99 percent of what is specific about each object is thrown away, for which only 1 percent of it is being represented—we are paying for a price of extreme schematisation (2011:38-48).

In a rather strange way, the growing trends of news visualisation and media homogeneity are in parallel in today's mediascape in Hong Kong. That is, media homogeneity is becoming more visible to the public at large. At the same time, the dynamics of media visuality can be gradually replaced by homogeneity. Figure 2 shows a social media post from June 2021, reacting to the shutdown of *Apple Daily* and highlighting both the silencing of opposition media and the growing conformity among mainstream outlets in the current media landscape. The user posted a photograph taken on 15 April 2021, with the caption: 'this explains why @appledaily_hk will be missed by many and what it means for #HongKong.' The photograph shows that, with the exception of *Apple Daily*, all major newspapers in Hong Kong published the same advertisement for National Security Education Day on their front pages. In contrast, *Apple Daily*, published a news story about a child abuse case. The image illustrates an overwhelming imbalance between competing visualities in mainstream media, as the lone copy of *Apple Daily* appears nearly buried in the sea of government propaganda. This visual contrast prompted citizens


**Figure 2**
'This explain why @appledaily_hk will be missed….' Source: X.

to express concern about the future of journalism, raising questions about whether there is still space for opposition and criticism of the ruling power.

## Censorship and surveillance

Following the enactment of the NSL, Hong Kong witnessed the cessation of operations of one its largest newspapers and several independent news outlets. Media practitioners faced tougher challenges to sustain journalistic independence, while the authorities gained control over narratives in both mainstream and alternative media. Besides broadcasters and independent journalists, publishers, libraries, filmmakers, artists, and curators all experienced strict censorship regarding national security (Davis 2022:109).

In Hong Kong, individuals and groups in the cultural industry have been utilising their resources and creative strategies to engage citizens in socio-political discussions since the 1980s (Leung 2021:118), by which a time when political censorship of films had long been implemented.

Chow (2024) summarises some key milestones in the evolution of film censorship in Hong Kong during the colonial era and under Chinese rule. In the 1920s, the colonial government mainly reviewed films based on their representations of race and relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. From the 1940s, left-wing films and Communist propaganda began to be censored. In the aftermath of

the 1967 riots, a significant number of pro-Communist films were censored for political reasons. Later, in the 1980s, film censorship took a new turn when films that might offend China—such as Taiwanese films with a political agenda—were banned due to the British Government's ongoing efforts to establish a better diplomatic relationship with China. Finally, in 1994, the political censorship of films was eliminated from the Film Censorship Ordinance. This resulted in a golden era of Hong Kong cinema, with productions that did not shy away from including political subtexts critical of the administration, reflecting the liberal and open creative environment that filmmakers enjoyed at the time (Siu 2024:56). However, starting from 2019, spaces for creating and consuming cultural products that touch upon sensitive political issues drastically shrank once again, as authorities tightened control over Hong Kong cinema as a consequence of the pro-democracy movements. For film scholars, censorship practices are often a reflection of a regime's mode of governance (Siu 2024:55). It is against this background of precarity, filmmakers in Hong Kong are still looking for ways to 'carve out a narrow space in which their films will circulate and resonate with Hong Kong audiences while circumventing censorship' (Siu 2024:66). For independent filmmakers working on projects that shed light on societal and political issues, it has been more difficult to get in these kinds of film projects made in post-NSL Hong Kong. This can be due to the resignation of actors, funding challenges, or a lack of screening locations. Furthermore, an amended film censorship law even prohibits filmmakers from appealing bans related to national security, creating uncertainty in the industry as decisions about what is permissible must be are based on vaguely defined political red lines. (Davis 2022:109; Datt 2021).

In addition to imposing stricter control over conventional media, the Hong Kong Government has simultaneously introduced new measures for online surveillance in this era of digital monitoring. Online surveillance typically involves the collection, storage and examination of digital footprints by the authorities, often targeting individuals who challenge the status quo through various forms of online engagement (Chan et al. 2024 :374). On the grounds of protecting national security and targeting posts that incite secession, law enforcement agencies have been granted the authority to monitor social media activity. A reporting hotline was established for potential violations of the NSL (Mak et al. 2024: 1987). The blocking of websites associated withs human rights organisation and social movement organisations is described as an expansion of China's firewall to include Hong Kong (Tak 2024). Although local authorities refused to claim responsibility for these blockages, there is a proven ongoing effort to remove content and restrict access to websites of pro-democracy organisations because they violate the NSL. These measures, along with the broad and ambiguous scope of activities vaguely linked to the definition of national security, are believed to significantly restrict and reshape Hong Kong citizens' political participation.

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the fact that scholars currently highlight concerns about how the surveillance of digital footprints has intensified following the arrests of social media users in connection to the views they expressed online (Chan & Min 2024:497; Mak et al. 2024:1987). Government surveillance of political participation on the internet has a major impact on not only activists' online engagement, but also that of ordinary citizens (Krueger 2005). While activists are punished for their online political actions, ordinary citizens are likely to censor themselves when they catch wind of the potential risks of surveillance. Ironically, drawing on Foucault's (1979) ideas regarding the normalisation of surveillance in modern society, Krueger proposes that when ordinary citizens recognise that their online activities are being surveilled, even when they are not the specific targets, this tends to elicit resistance, as part of an effort to reject the normalisation of surveillance in society (2005:441). From this perspective, it is problematic when authorities consistently downplay the impact of surveillance on the behaviour of ordinary citizens, claiming that only those already involved in illegal activities need to worry (Krueger 2005:449).

In the case of Hong Kong, the impact on both politically active individuals and those who are aware of surveillance but do not actively engage with dissenting political voices has been clear. Research findings have shown how both activists and ordinary citizens have either restricted their own online engagement or adjusted their privacy settings in recent years (Chu & Yeo 2020:155). Empirical analysis of online political participation in post-NSL Hong Kong also underlines the nuances of online engagement under platform surveillance. Chan and Min present findings showing that while explicit political voices are less visible on online platforms due to fear of surveillance, the same sense of fear could trigger positive political engagement on platforms they trust, by means of covert, indirect forms of expression (2024:511). In this sense, the complex relationship between fear and trust for the platform affects how citizens navigate the forms and expressions of their online participation (ibid.).

Evidently, growing surveillance on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram is being enforced in today's Hong Kong. In July 2020, four student activists were arrested over their social media posts, on suspicion of inciting succession (HKFP 2020). One of them, a 19-year-old activist, was first stopped on the street by a group of men, whereupon they presented a warrant to search his home. They seized his computers and phones. He was later released on bail without being charged, under the condition that he take down his social media posts. In March 2023, a student was arrested upon her return from a study abroad trip. Despite having a low public profile, she was charged with violating the NSL by posting content on Facebook and Instagram while she was in Japan that the authorities claimed to be inciting Hong Kong independence (Khoo 2024). She later pleaded guilty and was jailed for two months for sedition. In April 2025, a man was arrested for allegedly publishing seditious posts on Instagram and X, though the content

itself remains unknown to the public (HKFP 2025a). The authorities stated that the man had repeatedly published content inciting hatred against the state, and that the maximum sentence could be up to seven years in prison.

Since the first arrest in July 2020, international media and human rights organisations have criticised the new law for targeting ordinary citizens who peacefully express their views. They have raised concerns about the troubling possibility that under the NSL, individuals could be imprisoned for sharing dissenting political opinions on social media (Amnesty International 2020). In this context, the frequent and public arrests may serve a dual function: On one hand, they could send a chilling message to citizens and intensify fear surrounding online political discussions; on the other hand, they could also galvanize resistance and encourage civic participation among ordinary citizens.

## The rise of diasporic media

The field of media and communication studies has been examining processes and implications of media globalisation since before the explosive growth of digital platforms, often criticising the top-down structure of the global media system from cultural perspectives (Cunningham 2015). While some perceive globalisation as a driver for media and cultural diversity that allows for a more horizontal flow of information, other criticise that new gatekeepers are replacing editors, suggesting that diversity and plurality of voices are still hindered by filters, censors, and algorithmic logics (Cádima 2017). Therefore, in many corners of the globe, citizens' understanding of the world is still largely shaped by national frameworks (Curran 2011:85).

While in Hong Kong, members of the public are still able to access international news and information via Google and social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (except TikTok) without using a VPN, previous discussions in this chapter demonstrate that media practices in the region are increasingly shaped and constrained by local and national politics. Following the closure of several news outlets, access to plural and critical perspectives on both local and international affairs is further limited for Hong Kong citizens.

As of June 2024, over 150,400 people from Hong Kong have relocated to the United Kingdom, via the BNO (British National Overseas) visa scheme introduced exclusively for Hong Kong citizens in 2021 (Yiu 2024). Taiwan has also experienced a record-high number of visa applications from Hong Kong citizens since 2019, and has granted 61,240 temporary residency and a further 10,210 permanent residency respectively (National Immigration Agency 2025). Many Hong Kong emigrants feel a need to maintain connections to their cultural roots by consuming media from Hong Kong and engaging with the diaspora communities in their country of residence (Pun et al. 2025:2).

Among those who have emigrated from Hong Kong are journalists and political influencers. While they have adapted to cultural shifts in their new environments, several have launched new channels and platforms abroad, using YouTube and social media to share critical perspectives on issues that journalists based in Hong Kong find difficult to cover (Lee & Tse 2025:1591). According to Reporters Without Borders, in 2024, around ten diasporic media outlets were created by a few of these exiled journalists, following the loss of jobs for at least 900 media workers (RSF 2024). The organisation notes that while journalists often struggle to keep such operations sustainable, they have also expressed how launching these new media outlets has empowered them in ways that make them feel resilient and that ease their guilt about leaving their homeland.

These newly established forms of diasporic media are emerging from different locations, ranging from individual YouTubers to small-scale outlets. *Photon Media*, for instance, is a Taiwan-based independent news outlet established in 2023, by a group of former *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* reporters. According to their website, the media outlet seeks to 'let the voices of the Hong Kong diaspora and dissents be heard again' (Photon Media 2024). *Green Bean Media*, is another example of diasporic media outlet led by exiled journalists. Based in the United Kingdom, the media platform has a vision 'to reseed in new soil,' exploring ways to enable Hongkongers in different parts of the world to be seen and heard (Green Bean Media 2024). Generally, the establishment of diasporic media sources is believed to provide a means of transnational bonding and sustaining identities and culture from afar (Aksoy & Robins 2003:93). In post-NSL Hong Kong, empirical research highlights that diasporic media are also consumed by pro-democracy citizens residing in Hong Kong. As Lee and Tse (2025) note in their research on the consumption of diasporic media in Hong Kong, residents can be motivated by diasporic media's political attitude and high level of accessibility.

The contemporary media landscape in Hong Kong is no longer solely characterised by locally established media. Diasporic media founded overseas are gaining significance and visibility within Hong Kong's media landscape, serving as symbolic bridges between media practitioners and citizens residing in Hong Kong or abroad. For diaspora communities, these media play crucial roles in strengthening cultural identities and fostering solidarity (Pun et al. 2025:2; Georgiou 2013). For residents of Hong Kong, these new, alternative sources of news and information offer critical perspectives on local affairs, challenging hegemonic perspectives presented by dominant media organisations. However, it is important to note that engagement with these overseas sources is not without risk for residents. There have been instances in which paid subscribers to the Patreon accounts of exiled politicians were arrested under the NSL, based on the allegation that they were 'aiding, assisting or funding separatism' (Lam 2023). At the same time, continuous efforts by local journalists to sustain their journalistic professionalism amidst challenges should not be overlooked. *The Collective* (2025)—an online independent news

outlet recently founded by two experienced journalists—states on its website that independent journalists and new media in Hong Kong will continue to fight to uphold their mission of critical reporting in a professional and impartial manner, monitoring those in power and seeking the truth.

This chapter has outlined the significant developments in Hong Kong's media and political landscape in recent years. It began by identifying major transformations in the city's political environment, most notably the decline in press freedom and the diminishing space for organised contentious actions within civil society. The second part of the chapter presented an overview of the broader evolutions in the Hong Kong mediascape, particularly in relation to global trends of media concentration and visualisation. At the same time, it highlighted how media censorship and surveillance, as well as the growing number of diasporic media outlets, have contributed to shifts within this specific media landscape. In the next chapter, I will turn to a discussion of the literature that outlines key perspectives for the present study's exploration of the concepts and practices of visual civic engagement in the digital age.

# 3. Literature Review

While media and communication studies provide the foundational theoretical and analytical framework for investigating what I term as 'civic visuals', this literature review highlights the thesis's ambition to broaden the scope of enquiry by integrating insights from other disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. First and foremost, I explore literature from the field of visual culture to establish the basis for conducting social research on images. Drawing from notable scholars in the field, including W.J.T. Mitchell and Nicolas Mirzoeff, this discussion foregrounds the importance of claiming the 'right to look' and of taking visuals seriously in constructing our understanding of the world. Secondly, I review and reflect on discussions and arguments surrounding social movement studies, particularly those with a cultural focus on studies interested in the visual aspects and playful elements of activism. In the third and last part of this chapter, I present conceptual discussions on the notion of remembrance in order to explore how remembrance of social movements is articulated and sustained. By taking a closer look at the concepts of remembrance and collective memory, this discussion elaborates on the importance of incorporating critical media perspectives when conceptualising collective memories within a networked environment that is profoundly shaped by media digitalisation.

## Understanding the visual world: a visual culture perspective

We live in a visual world—a society in which images constantly surround us. Literary theorist and art historian W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) coined the term 'pictorial turn' to describe the phase in which the whole of society turns to visuals and images. The pictorial turn is no single occurrence; rather, it has been repeated many times in history. It refers to a cultural and intellectual shift in which images—rather than words or language—become central to how we communicate, think, and understand the world. The pictorial turn is closely tied to the rise of digital media, mass communication, and visual culture in the late 20$^{th}$ and early 21$^{st}$ centuries. From advertising and social media to activism and art, images have become central to public discourse.

From billboards and road signs to videos on social media and television, we are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of visuals every day. Being visually literate—having the ability to construct interpretations and understand the meanings behind images—is therefore crucial to the construction of knowledge about society in the modern world (Howells & Negreiros 2019). Interdisciplinary studies of visual culture emerged before the new millennium, when the concept and style of postmodernism were popularised in artistic, cultural, and intellectual arenas. Although visual culture shares similar interests with established fields like aesthetic studies and art history, it is not only interested in the visual images and the senses they evoke, but also the processes and developments that facilitate or hinder the creation and distribution of such visuals in society. As Mitchell argues, visual studies supplements the previous disciplines' efforts to situate the study of visuals in modern society by calling attention to visuality (2002:167).

From the perspectives of visual culture, visuality is a social construct with a political agenda, reproduced and shared through generations (Lacan 1978; Bryson 1988:107–8). From paintings of historical events that reflect only the narratives of those in power, to contemporary media productions dominated by certain narratives while concealing the others, visuality is said to favour the hegemonic narratives. In this sense, it highlights the power structure that dictates what is being visualised. As Bryson explains, to question visuality through analyses is to examine how power uses this social construct to visualise their narratives, and how people in power use visuality to disguise their operations (1988:107).

For scholars of visual culture, visualisation derives from power. More specifically, the concept of visuality was developed by imperial power. Visualisation is formulated on the basis that the ability to assemble a visualisation of history lies in the hands of the authority (Mirzoeff 2009:6; 2011b:2); what is authorised to visualise the history of a culture is strictly controlled by the power holders. In this tradition, visualisation holds an opposite position to democracy. Historically, visuality has favoured powerful societal actors, as they possess greater access and resources to determine which aspects of history are visualised and which are omitted. While such representations are often contested in reality, the perspectives of ordinary individuals rarely constitute visuality in mediated portrayals (Mirzoeff 2011b:92). In contemporary society, contesting visualities continue to reflect on the power imbalance between stakeholders in the media, except that the contestation may have become more visible to ordinary citizens. In an everyday life scenario, when walking past a newspaper stand or visiting a convenience store, we can often observe how different newspapers compete with the most important news stories they have selected, by visualising them on their frontpage. In an autonomous media environment, different journalistic perspectives are expected to be represented in these visualised narratives of news stories and events. In contrast, when authorities impinge on journalistic professionalism, these contestations are restricted. In that

sense, in mainstream media, visuality is still largely controlled by the powerful actors of today.

Furthermore, visual culture within the field of journalism has also shown how photographs can break free from, and challenge, dominant frameworks for new ones originally imposed on photographs by power-holding elites. In a cultural reception exploration of the Abu Ghraib photographs—amateur snapshots of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at the prison Abu Ghraib prison located west of Baghdad that disseminated worldwide in 2004, Kari Andén-Papadopoulos concludes that '[…] the power of the photographs has frequently been explicitly turned against themselves, transforming them into sites of protest and opposition to the very deeds they represent' (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 23). Investigating visuality is thus a process of visual research aimed at understanding how our social world is constructed as a network constellation of imageries (Knochel 2013:14).

In a world experiencing increasing surveillance, conflicts, and technological changes, it is necessary for studies of visuals to go beyond examining images and their meanings. They must extend their interest to everyday practices of showing and seeing. To this end, the research field of visual culture calls for a new alliance between art history, aesthetics, and media studies—the construction of a complex and comprehensive theoretical framework (Mitchell 2002:168-70). Visual culture is a site for interdisciplinary dialogue, encompassing the study of human visual practices across diverse social contexts – not limited to modernity or Western traditions (Mitchell 1995:541; 2002 :174). In contrast to the profoundly Eurocentric discipline of art history (Elsner 2022:322), visual culture is concerned with contemporary power relations and politics across cultures. It is interested in studying popular culture, media, non-artistic visual representations, commercial media, digital images, social practices of seeing and spectatorship, as well as the unconscious and conscious dimensions of life (Mitchell 2003:250). Rather than studying particular forms of media produced in one particular place at one particular time, visual culture invites cross-cultural, cross-platform and cross-temporal comparisons as a means to understand the modern tendency to visualise existence and how to negotiate this in our everyday life (Mirzeoff 1999:5; 2009:1).

## Claiming the right to look

Another notable series of work in the field of visual culture presented by Nicolas Mirzoeff (2009 [1999) offers a comprehensive mapping of the global history and theory of visual culture. He posits a broad conceptualisation of visual culture by boldly claiming the right to look:

> Visual culture, everyday, has to claim the right to look, to see the migrant, to visualise the war, to recognise climate change. In reclaiming that look, it refuses to do the commodified labour of looking, of paying attention. It claims the right to be seen by

> the common as a counter to the possibility of being disappeared by governments. It claims the right to a secular viewpoint. Above all, it is the claim to a history that is not told from the point of view of the police (Mirzoeff 2009:15).

Here, Mirzeoff refers to Jacques Rancière's conception of police, which understood as the institutional form of what Rancière (1999; 2004) calls 'the distribution of the sensible'. To put it in another way, the police is the body that defines 'the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying' (Rancière 1999:29). For Rancière, politics is an intervention in the visible and the sayable, of which is determined by the police. Drawing on Rancière's political theory and his conceptualisation of police, the field of visual culture explores politics today as the meeting of the visible and the unspeakable (Mirzoeff 2025:28-39). In a chaotic world in which conflicts and oppressions are visible in the everyday, oppressed groups and their visions still remain unspeakable in ordinary ways. To reclaim the right to be seen, these groups should therefore speak in extraordinary ways—not through words, but symbols that travel across temporal, spatial, political, and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, the interpretation of visual symbols is rarely one-dimensional. The meaning of a symbol can vary significantly depending on the context and on the perspective of those who view it. This applies equally to protest slogans or symbols. Mirzoeff (2025:28-30) takes the symbol of an inverted red triangle as an example. On one hand, it is regarded as a violent symbol of antisemitism, particularly for the Jewish and Israeli communities. On the other hand, it is used by Palestian supporters as a symbol of resistance for showing solidarity with the Palestian communities. Here, Mirzoeff underlines the irony of claiming a singular meaning of a symbol and subjecting the use of such symbols in policing. Visual symbols, as shown in this example, can be reproduced, appropriated, and transformed into diverse expressions.

Furthermore, the idea of claiming the right to look goes beyond the matter of seeing. It is not about claiming individualism, but rather about claiming autonomy, political subjectivity and collectivity (Mirzoeff 2011a:473). This right facilitates exchanges between all parties and enables one group to find and recognise the other. In contrast, blinding an individual or a group through acts of condemnation, polarisation, or punishment can be understood as an attempt to suppress the possibility of an equal exchange through looking.

Taken together, visual culture acknowledges the claim of the right to look, even when we are told by authorities to look away (Mirzoeff 2009:14-5). Its emergence in the 1990s marked a notable shift in how we see the world (Mirzoeff 2015:11), as new technologies became available to authorities and accessible to ordinary citizens, whether they were new surveillance technologies or advancements in digital cameras. Today, the central question of visual culture remains how we see the vast and changing world, which is undergoing an exponential growth in imagery

(Mirzoeff 2015:11). With that said, we must never overlook what we cannot see, but keep engaging in discussions about what is being kept out of sight.

## Critiques of visual culture

Driven by an interest in understanding the visual construction of the social (Mitchell 2002:170), visual culture provides a transgressive perspective by addressing what Becker (2004) calls the problematic divide between production and reception in the field of media and communication studies. As Becker argues, visuality is also a form of knowledge that emerges through the act of looking. In other words, what an audience sees or perceives is not simply transmitted by the producer, but shaped within the dynamic and interactive relationship between seeing and being seen (Becker 2004:155). Rather than focusing on audience reception, scholars of visual culture advocate for a curious approach to the study of images, inspired by Mulvey's (1996) feminist film theories. Rogoff argues that 'the curious eye' fosters investigation into the 'forbidden, hidden or the unthought', while boosting the optimism of discovering something previously unknown or unimaginable (1988:18). Yet, the ambiguous nature and absence of clear methodological frameworks in visual culture have prompted criticisms from those in the fields of cultural and media studies. In this sense, the problem for visual culture remains its object of study: While the study of pictures is too narrow, the study of the entirety of visual culture is too broad (Becker 2004:150). Ironically, being the most open-ended and cross-disciplinary approach to the study of images (Rogoff 1998 :14) could be considered both a strength and a weakness within this emergent field.

Another common critique of visual culture is the practice of using implicit methodology that lacks a structure and a framework, particularly regarding the absence of audiences in the search for the meaning of images (Stafford 1991; Rose 2016:3). In Rose's (2012) discussion on the general approach of visual culture studies' methodologies as proposed by Sturken and Cartwright (2001), she argues that the meaning of images is made by the viewer and their social practices. Rose summarises visual culture methodologies by highlighting three key aspects: an emphasis on meaning and interpretation; a lack of knowledge about audiences; and the unclear role of the critic. She questions visual culture scholars' overly concern about the meaning of an image, an approach that overshadows the audience's perspective in the meaning-making process. Rose proposes the idea of understanding visualities as *practices* by paying more attention to people's doing and saying, as well as underlining the specific context in which the visual events unfold. Here, Rose refers to Reckwitz's (2002:249) definition of a practice as a routinised type of behaviour consisting of bodily gestures, emotions, objects, and knowledge. By exploring visualities as practices, social relations and identities may be revealed. From this perspective, visual culture studies can be enriched by relying more heavily on ethnographic approaches, allowing both researchers and the

researched to reflect on the highly complex and evolving visual practices shaped by power structures (2012:17-18).

Afterall, visual culture is interested in the social and the people. As Mitchell (1995:544) underlines, rather than merely focusing on the interpretation of images, visual culture must also be grounded in the 'description of the social field of the gaze, the construction of subjectivity, identity, desire, memory, and imagination'. As intriguing as this perspective is, it is undeniable that visual culture offers contemporary perspectives for understanding what is visuality and how our understanding of the world is shaped by it. At the same time, research in the social sciences demands a more structured framework in the development of methodologies for studying visuals. While audience interviews do not fall within the scope of this present study (see Chapter 5), this author is aware of the limitations and common critiques of the lack of audience perspectives. This acknowledgement is reflected in the chosen methodologies, which are informed by Rose's (2016) framework of critical visual methodologies, with emphasis on the four sites of images: the site of image; the site of production; the site of circulation; and the site of the audience. With aid of this framework, a critical reflection on the technological, compositional, and social aspects of the overall visual materials will be presented.

## Visuals and social movements

From the American Revolution in the 1700s to the protests staged by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in the 1980s, activists have mobilised social movements and promoted engagement through creative performance, through the utilisation of narratives, images, and humour. As artists and activists themselves, Duncombe and Lambert (2021) point out, activists' use of artistic expression and storytelling to make sense of politics and make it more playful are some of the key principles of past influential activism.

For the French situationists of the 1950s, art was central to their political expressions during the anti-globalisation movement. They formulated two artistic concepts—*recuperation* and *detournément*—new artistic production through the appropriation of culturally existing symbols. Recuperation refers to the action of giving a new meaning to an existing symbol, to highlight the irony of 'how the ruling class would twist every form of protest around to salvage its own ends' (Downing 2001:59). As Debord (1995) notes, detournément implies the spinning of the meaning of a symbol to direct it against itself. It is described as a technique that integrates past and current artistic production to resist the ruling power by detouring, hijacking and appropriating (Wark 2011). The relationship between symbol and power has been examined in the field of political communication, in which symbols are seen as not

merely as images, but as 'units of meanings' that reflect political positions and are capable of communicating complex ideologies, feelings, and identities (Acevedo 2024:44-50).

The use of graphics in political movements has long been established, since as early as the 15th century and the Reformation, and through the French Revolution (McQuiston 2019). The forms and styles of these graphics develop over time, and through the current advances in digital technology, digital graphics are now created and disseminated on diverse platforms. The processes of production and distribution of images have become more efficient and lower-cost, fostering a more heterogeneous and approachable culture of visual activism.Though their styles and forms have transformed throughout different historical periods and as a result of technological advancements, these protest graphics share a passion for representing power struggles, challenging established power, expressing concern for a cause, and demanding for changes.

In her discussion of the history of *protest graphics*, McQuiston (2019) addresses the power and temporality of these imageries, arguing that the power of visuals—constituted by emotions, aggression, and immediacy—allows viewers to perceive the passion of their creators and be connected and united by it. As powerful affective forces for drawing attention and evoking a broad range of emotions, 'from hilarious satire to utter horror', are encompassed in imageries from both historical and contemporary times (ibid.). By examining the social and political protest graphics of the Reformation in the 1500s and the French Revolution of the 18th century, as well as those of recent movements around the globe like the Umbrella Movement and Black Lives Matter, McQuiston underlines the timeless iconography of these imageries. While centuries-old dictatorships may seem distant and irrelevant to someone living in a democracy today, the visual representation of such power struggles retains its agency and relevance. Modern viewers can still be moved by these visual portrayals of inequality, with current events giving new meanings to dated images. Classic, timeless symbols from historical graphics can be appropriated by artists today as a means by which to emphasise the temporality of a societal or political issue. The meaning and significance of protest graphics do not fade away or vanish once the protest concludes, as the visual communication of power struggles continues to endure and create new meanings over time (ibid.).

## Les Poires: Political art of the king with the pear-shaped head

The Pear King is one of countless examples of a caricature of the bourgeois spirit and political satire in public debates of democracy. The pear symbol alone has sparked scholarly discussion around its design, reception, uses, and myths (Erre 2017). During the July Monarchy of 1831, French journalist Charles Philipon published a drawing titled *Les Poires* (The Pears) in his weekly periodical *La*

*Caricature* (see Figure 3). This drawing consists of four simple illustrations. The first illustration on the top left depicts a face of an old man with short, curly hair and a grumpy, saggy face. Apart from the collar, the rest of the body is not shown. The second illustration on the top right slightly differs from the first one, with more details on the face that show deeper contrasts and longer hair. While the top of the head gets pointier, the bottom gets wider, as if the face has grown larger. The third illustration on the bottom left is a simplified version of the second one. The lines become lighter and cleaner, but somehow the face gets even grumpier with the wrinkles. The hair grows around the entire face, which is now clearly the shape of—a pear. Finally, we arrive at the last illustration on the bottom right. The facial features of the old man disappear almost completely as the pear is revealed. All that remains are two strokes that resemble a sad pair of eyes and some lines around the nose and mouth area. Where the pointy, curly hair used to be, there is now a stem, and the rest of the hair has turned into leaves.


**Figure 3**
Les Poires by Charles Philipon. Source: Bibliothèque de France.

The drawing was created to show how the face of the king, Louis-Philippe, can be turned into a pear in just four simple steps. Why a pear? Perhaps it was because the pear shape and characteristics perfectly resembled the king's facial and bodily features. This satirical expression also mocks the monarch and his rule as powerless and soft—just like a pear. It questions the king's ability to lead and rule, as the public perceived him as indecisive and confused. The monarch as a person and France as a country are both embodied in these simple drawings of the pears. It is understood by French scholars that the pear motif is also embedded with Philipon's wish to defend freedom of expression, as the royal government was targeting the press at the time (Dupuy 2014:2; Erre 2011). As a result of publishing the drawing, Philipon was fined and charged with defamation of the king. *Les Poires* was subsequently banned in France, but the pear has since become a symbol of resistance. In a French context, the word 'poire' has also become a synonym for an imbecile or someone who is too soft and easily deceived (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales 2012).

The pear motif was seen as a titillating representation of Louis-Philippe, except, of course, by the king himself, who was insulted by the drawings. While he could impose a ban on the drawings, it would be absurd to ban pears themselves or objects in the shape of a pear. Despite the censorship of the pear drawings, Philipon continued to publish his work in different 'pear-forms' after his fifteen-month imprisonment (McQuiston 2019:27). Ever since then, other caricaturists, artists, and the public have also taken up the motif. The pear was seen and heard in different parts of France, from Paris to the provinces, from graffiti on walls to conversations between citizens—validating Philipon's prediction for the pear motif: the seed that was sown had grown (Dupuy 2014:3).

The pear symbol was simple to draw and understand, making it easy to copy and transmit from person to person. On top of that, it was fun! The pear spread like an Internet meme in 19th-century France and remains as a culturally significant symbol in France today. This humorous symbol was able to disrupt the monotone expressions of dissatisfactions with the monarchy, while disarming systems of power at the same time (Shepard 2011:3). Just as Rancière describes the dream of a suitable political artwork (2004:63), the pear symbol successfully opened up public discussions on this relatively sensitive topic, by carrying a political significance and causing a sensible shock by virtue of its uncanny. A political work of art such as this challenges the relationship between the visible and sayable and the thinkable, without the explicit use of any disruptive words.

## Visuals in social movement studies

Despite social discontent and political protest being expressed in form of visuals for centuries, visual elements have not been at the core of scholarly interests in social

movement studies. Doerr, Mattoni and Teune urge social science researchers to examine the visual aspects of political processes by highlighting the different forms of visuals in social movements (2015:1-2). The scholars argue that visuals in social movement studies should not be limited to photographs and graphics like posters and flyers. Other visual elements, such as bodily gestures, clothing, and symbols, are all important forms of representation in a social movement. This perspective draws attention to the empirical richness of a variety of visual materials in answering key questions in social movement research. As the scholars posit, it is necessary for researchers interested in social movement studies to acknowledge visuals as a powerful tool for protesters to convey complex messages (Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2015:7-8).

On a similar note, the global protest wave that we have witnessed in recent decades cannot simply be understood without giving attention to its aesthetic dimensions (Peeren et al. 2018:14). Within media studies, scholars have argued for the images' positive impact on drawing media coverage and amplifying the visibility of social movements (Delicath & DeLuca 2003). This shift toward more publicly visible tactics has helped bring civil rights issues into the spotlight, contributing to the prominence of non-violent, mass participatory protests as a key for advocating social and political change (Rovisco 2017:351). Under this shift, more studies have acknowledged the prominence of visual representations in protests and how they constituted a key concern of social movements beginning from the 1990s (Ryan 1991).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in examining visual elements in social movements, public protests, and political activism, especially on social media (San Cornelio 2023:193). However, when comparing the attention given to textual and visual sources in social studies, text-based research remains as the primary focus of scholarly interest. One possible explanation is that images used in social movements are often deeply rooted in local contexts, making them difficult to interpret or adapt across different socio-cultural settings (Doerr & Teune 2012). For scholars who are interested in studying social movement visuals, this creates more complications in the research process, as ambiguity in images can be seen as a struggle to make sense of an image. We may find ourselves in situations where it is hard to understand what a painting means because it can mean everything or nothing. However, the ambiguity also makes it possible for the viewers to see something in an image that can only be seen because of certain experiences we have. This contextualisation is essential for interpreting images, as one cannot fully understand an image without first grasping its context. When the local context is particularly distinctive and challenging for researchers from different backgrounds to comprehend, it demands significantly more effort to contextualise these visuals in order to conduct meaningful research and produce insightful findings.

Additionally, contextualisation is key in understanding acts of civil resistance. This is because the same performance can convey different meanings in different

contexts (Graeber 2013:208). While one performance can be decipherable to one group, it could also be invisible or obscure to everyone else (Taylor 2016). Nonetheless, any activity that a participant engages in within a particular setting to influence other participants is considered a performance, as Goffman (1956:8) argues. Wearing a badge at a rally can be understood as a visual performance to demonstrate dissent, and after witnessing the performance, other participants may be inspired to wear the same badge as a performance of solidarity (Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2015:3-5; Tilly 2008; Alexander 2011; Linke 1988; Lahusen 1996). In this sense, the performance of wearing a badge evolves from one participant to another, as the contexts of these performances differ, despite involving the same activity.

## Digital visual activism

As previous discussions in this literature review show, the concept of combining art and activism is not a recent phenomenon. For centuries art has met activism in many shapes and forms across the globe. From Philipon's caricatures of the 1700s to the street art movements in Senegal (Shipley and Moriuchi 2023:7) and during the Egyptian Arab Spring (Naguid 2016), to Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei's art installations advocating for human rights (Ponzanesi 2019:215). For decades, different terms have emerged in the exploration of these forms of artistic work. *Activist art* is understood as socially involved, context-oriented, and largely shaped by community collaboration (Lippard 1984; Shipley & Moriuchi 2018:3-4). It is common for artists to directly express and take a stance on the issue(s) addressed in their artwork of this form. Earlier understanding of *political art*, while sharing many similarities with *protest art*, tend to be less attuned to context and audience. These categories share many similarities and overlap with each other in terms of how they are produced, and how they are in an effort to harness the power of people and their communities to bring about social or political change.

A more recently conceptualised form of artistic activism is *artivism.* Emerged in the early 2000s, this form of expression encompasses artworks that employ metaphors, irony, humour, and provocation or compassion, to engage audiences by evoking a sense of collectiveness in a process of learning and reflection (Aladro-Vico et al. 2018:10). The concept was inspired by the notion of *action art* that emerged in Europe during the anti-globalisation movement in the 1960s. A significant difference between the two is that the rise of activism was closely connected to that of social media platforms. Particularly, it has evolved from earlier forms of artistic activism through the use of social media and is characterised by a highly urban and critical approach (Rodal et al. 2019:25-27). Based on this, artivism is defined as a process-oriented, temporal, collaborative practice in public sites that often is decisively political and has determinable claims (Danko 2018:239-240).

Despite the wide range of categories, upon categorising the empirical material of this present study under the abovementioned terms, it is noticeable that the intent of

these images is often blurred. While some of these images articulate explicit political claims, others cannot be characterised as decisively political in themselves. Nonetheless, they are intrinsically situated within the broader dynamics of digital culture.

Within a commercially driven, digital culture in which many social media users are just 'absentmindedly scrolling through nothing' (Lupinacci 2020), users are less likely to spend minutes reading long paragraphs to learn about a protest, but more likely to pay attention when an intriguing image from a violent protest pops up on their feed. Digital culture, stherefore, fosters a wider reach to audience within a shorter period of time, across geographical borders. In a networked society that absorbs information and processed efficiently through the constant introduction of new actors and new content (Castells 2010), messages travel across platforms within seconds and can immediately be viewed and shared to places beyond the original platform. Van Dijck (2013) points out that social media platforms provide an arena for public communication in the shaping of norms and the contesting of rules. Users of platform technologies are empowered by their potential to reach audiences, as they occupy a space at the intersection between old and new media, demanding for participation within culture (van Dijck 2013:50). By this argument, engagement and interactions in social media environment are therefore seen not only as expressions of individuality, but also as the source of sense of connectivity (van Dijck 2013:34-5; Bennett & Segerberg 2013 ). However, while social media can enable powerful moments of collectivity in social movements and facilitate the formation of communities around critical political and social issues, these commercially influenced communities are fundamentally ephemeral and constantly evolving (Poell & van Dijck 2018:554).

With that said, communication scholars believe that political interest can be activated through the avenue that are of a cultural nature (Papacharissi 2014:120). Accesses to information is promoted and offered to users on social media, through ways of remixing information (ibid.). In this sense, users are invited to 'play' with the information and sustain their political engagement online, oftentimes gaining an intense sense of feeling—a 'release of tension' through these interactions (Papacharissi 2014:127). To achieve this sense of relief, it is not always required that the engagement has to be expressly political. To illustrate this point, I will elaborate on the notion of disguised resistance in the following section.

## Disguised resistance

Danko posits that artivism is a rare art-activist practice that resists a binary system, but allows for several codes to be applied, thus making it possible to intentionally conceal political meanings (2018:240). This argument aligns with Scott's (2005) notion of 'hidden transcript' in his political scientific and anthropological studies on the arts of resistance. According to Scott, a hidden transcript occurs when political

actions are designed to conceal their intentions or an apparent meaning related to a subordinate group that is marginalised and powerless (2005:72). He describes how the power from above determines how thick the disguise should by, by stating 'the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask' (Scott 1990:3). In his writing on resistance, Scott considers how different forms of political disguise have long been a way for subordinate groups in strictly oppressive societies to express feelings and opinions, without violating the law (1990:2-71). Historically, public transcript describes the open interaction between those in power and the subordinates, such as slaves and prisoners. In general, hidden transcript is understood as a means to facilitate resistant discourses that take place beyond direct observation by the power holders.

What it takes forms that are strategically designed to conceal intentions and apparent meanings, the hidden transcript is often practiced anonymously through the establishment of informal networks. The logic of this is to minimize traceability and risk and to allow for 'a defence in depth of the powerless' (Scott 1990:72). However, in public discourse between the dominants and the subordinates, surreptitious political actions are not necessarily less important than open gestures of resistance. Scott highlights that the hidden transcript is a condition of practical resistance, rather than a substitute for it, noting that '[e]ach of the forms of disguised resistance […] is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance' (2005:71).

From this perspective, apparent political intentions that might lead to serious punishment must be disguised by resisters. Although disguised resistance might not generate any immediate effect on bringing changes, the ability to perform certain forms of resistance often has great symbolic meaning to communities. Among many forms of resistance, the creation of artistic forms of expression with a disguised political meaning is a common approach practiced by dissidents living under repressive regimes. This is because artists-activists believe that these practices are often more tolerated or even celebrated in countries where open political protest is prohibited: 'Art allows us to say things that can't be said, to give form to abstract feelings and ideas and present them in such ways that they can be communicated with others' (Duncombe and Lambert 2021:25). In this regard, art is considered to be a camouflage that has the capacity to neutralise political messages and to protect the artist (Żmijewski 2012; Danko 2018). When the political message takes cover behind the aesthetic appeals of an artwork, the intended message becomes obscure, neutralising the political aspect of the artwork. Hence, despite the rise of social surveillance, it remains possible for activists to continue to challenge the power structure through artistic practice. This perspective is central to the thesis, as the empirical analysis develops and expands upon these subtler and more playful modes of resistance.

# The power of play in democracy

While art, poetry, law, and order are indications of a civilised society, they are all deep-rooted in the 'primeval soil' of play, argues Huizinga (1949:5). Play is a vital part of the human experience, whether in our everyday life or in activism (Shepard 2011:3). It is also the very form of culture that is present everywhere and simply cannot be denied in human society (Huizinga 1949:3-13). In Huizinga's interpretation, play can be a contest or a representation that demonstrates social, cultural, and civilising functions. On one hand, play can create tension between players. On the other hand, it brings harmony. Huizinga's emphasis on the ludic nature of historical contestation brings attention to the social relations and material conditions the shape the playful features of democratic contestation in the study of modern democracy (Edwards 2012:92). The elements of order, tension, rhythm, and harmony in both contestations and their representation further direct the concept of play into the realm of the aesthetics (Huizinga 1949). Cultural venues such as theatres and sports arenas are also political venues, where the acts of play and power are displayed simultaneously. Social movements, too, often unfold as a kind of street theatre (Esherick & Wasserstrom 1990), where the public is invited to participate and express dissent through their actions. The theatrical aspects of a public space fosters cultural and playful practices to contest and represent political claims (Veg 2016:683-4). Today, these venues are extended to the digital realm, where social media platforms become significant arenas for both contestation and representation through both serious and playful expressions.

## Play and humour

While play and humour are considered to be key cultural strategies that serve a purpose in heated situation, they must go hand-in-hand (McLuhan 1964:40). Without a sense of humour, play is likely to become a source of contestation and may have a violent effect. Familiar critiques of the playful approaches to resistance and the 'carnival spirit' adopted by some protesters can occasionally lead to internal tensions, creating divisions within the community. This has also been a recurring theme in Hong Kong, where playful or festive practices like collective singing and dancing, viewed as peaceful and risk-averse (Rühlig 2016:59), are deemed inappropriate by 'serious' participants. Similar criticisms arouse during the Umbrella Movement, when a group of pro-democracy protesters sang the song 'Happy Birthday to You' upon encountering an angry crowd led by a prominent figure in the pro-establishment camp. Building upon this, Lai argues that when tension arises, humorous activities are necessary to engage participants (2018:75). It is the scholar's observation that these kinds of ironic, nonsensical performances have been proven to be effective in de-escalating tension by transforming violent energy into laughter and playful performances (Lai 2018:68).

From this perspective, playful practices and performances are key to sustaining a peaceful protest, even when tensions emerge frequently. However, it is important not to overlook the presence and role of humour in these situations. By this line, playful and nonsensical performances at protests are not merely transforming the political event into a carnival. Rather, it is their humorous effects that allow cultural meanings to be reinforced in political actions (Lai 2018:80). In understanding the social and civilising functions of playful acts in social movements, it is necessary to reflect on how a shared sense of humour among participants is crucial for 'cooling' tensions and preventing aggressive interactions.

For some social movement scholars, one of the biggest motivations for people to return to protest events over and over again is their enjoyment of them (Jasper 2014:111). The sense of belonging sparked by engaging oneself in collective playful practices can be an exhilarating experience (Collins 2001). At protests, people gather as a group and interact with each other, feel similar emotions, and create shared memories. This kind of positive emotional energy associated with political gatherings and the people who organise them is also a part of what social movement actors want to achieve (Jasper 2014:111). As Shepard explains, humour and pleasure holds the capacity to break the monotony of routine while disarming systems of power (2011:3). It is therefore common for activists and participants to employ innovative forms of play and performances to foster relationships and solidarity among communities with a shared sense of pleasure, humour, and recognition of similar forms of oppression (Shepard 2011:57-8).

## Internet memes and videogame activism as forms of playful engagement

In online participatory culture, humour often emerges through the creation of 'creative metaphors' that enable a playful engagement with civic society (Bouko's 2024:64-5). Such creation is explicitly evident in the form of humorous internet memes, which are not only prominent cultural creations in digital culture, but are also understood as potential emerging spaces for political communication characterised by 'polyvocal expression' (Doona 2024:68; Coleman 2013; Shifman 2014:123). This humorous bias often allows the message to seem more striking or even absurd, thereby increasing its memorability and enhancing its resonance with the audience, compared to non-playful forms of expressions.

Building on biologist Richard Dawkin's original concept of memes, meme scholar Shifman (2014:39-41) approaches internet memes in digital culture as 'units of imitations' that share common characteristics of content, form, and stance. Understood as cultural products of replications and adaptations, memes create a shared cultural experience between individual users through the processes of circulating, imitating, and transforming (Shifman 2013:366-7; 2014:12). The

circulation of memes is particularly dependent on algorithms, commercial interests, and human agency (Poell & van Dijck 2013; Kristensen & Mortensen 2021:2446). Under the big umbrella of the genre of memes, political memes are defined as a construct with arguments or purposes to challenge prevalent political discourses (Wiggins 2019:65). In studies of social and cultural sciences, political memes are known as a significant means of information, interaction, political deliberation (Denisova 2019:2), as well as a democratising genre that does not lean on the institutional authority (Kristensen & Mortensen 2021:2446).

Although civic visuals share some characteristics with internet memes—particularly with political memes—there are fundamental differences between the two genres that warrant further conceptualisation. In answering one of the research sub-questions, 'What are civic visuals?', it is a crucial step to outline the unique characteristics of civic visuals that distinguish them from memes through a qualitative analysis of the genre. A basic difference is evident even before a deep dive into the visual empirical material in this thesis. That is, civic visuals are created neither through imitation nor through replication. Rather, they are best described as original artistic content curated and designed by individual artists or creators. While similarities may exist between individual works, such as the use of common symbols and colours, civic visuals are approached here as creative expressions of shared experiences among citizens engaged in everyday discussions of social issues and current events.

Drawing on civic knowledge and the cultural experiences of citizens, civic visuals emerge through appropriations and adaptations of common visual elements (e.g. symbols and colours) that represent the collective narratives and identities of the communities telling the story. At the same time, civic visuals are interpreted as such only when the viewers share a similar stance, civic knowledge, identity, and cultural experience within a specific civic community. In this interpretation, there is a thin line that distinguish civic visuals from the broader concept of memes, primarily in their originality of their styles and aesthetics. Beyond creating a shared cultural experience, civic visuals can be seen as invitations to discussion and reflection on past and present socio-political issues that are rarely understood by viewers outside the local communities. These aspects will be further elaborated and analysed in the following chapter as I unpack my conceptual approach to the notion of civic visuals.

Besides internet memes, scholars in the field of media studies and critical game studies have examined how smartphone games and videogames are designed, modified, and played by citizens, as a means by which to playfully engage with political issues and social injustice (Gray & Leonard 2018; Glas et al. 2019:9). In Hong Kong, the creation and modification of existing smartphone games were part of the playful tactics adopted by pro-democracy protesters (Wirman & Jones 2020). For instance, the popular mobile game *Pokémon* GO was used by protesters to pin and share locations and other key information, using the in-game map (Davies 2020). The phenomenon of videogame activism emerges as a recognition of how

videogames are created and appropriated as a communication medium through which political actors can initiate and bring about change (Jones 2007). At the same time, game design elements are deployed by political actors in their campaign design as a way to encourage political participation (Bossetta 2019; 2022). In Wirman and Jones' (2020) study on the utilisation of play and games during the Anti-ELAB Movement, they highlight the fact that game slangs have been heavily adopted by protesters as a means through which to engage young protesters by creating a common language among themselves. Gaming terms were appropriated in talks to address complicated and tiresome political topics (Wirman & Jones 2020). Ho (2020) further underlines the popular use of wordplays among participants who discuss these issues in an online environment. He argues that pro-democracy protesters adopted computer game vocabularies and slangs as an attempt to evade online surveillance and legal liability. For example, the term 'fire magic' has been used to refer to Molotov cocktail tactics, and 'fire magicians' to connote those who employ said tactic. The playfulness embedded in games can thus be seen as a driver or motivation for engagement. Afterall, playfulness is both productive and a key constituent of civic society and citizenship, as it allows people to explore imagined versions of reality and the future of civil society (Huizinga 1949:4).

Studies of different contemporary protest movements have elaborated on the role of playful tools in facilitating and sustaining civic and political participation around the globe (Shepard 2011; Jasper 2014; Glas et al. 2019; Bouko 2024). The idea that play is a representation of the exploratory and joyful dimension of activism is reinforced in these critical discussions on how individuals use it to reimagine and embody new identities, forms of social relationships, and approaches to political engagement (Moore in Shepard 2011:xv).

In Hong Kong, playfulness has become more prominent in political engagement since the 2010s, stemming from the notion of 'joyous resistance' popularised by localist Wan Chin. The idea of maintaining a festive atmosphere at protests departs from the belief that public appeal is reserved for those who are joyful and constructive, who are seen as embodying desirable values and lifestyles, whereas those who are angry and destructive can merely express pain and nihilism (Ng & Chan 2017:97). Regarding the adoption by mainstream social movement groups of localists' ideas in pro-democracy events, socialist activist Li (2020) explains that it is partly due to the 'slippery' nature of the term 'localism' in the Hong Kong context. While localism encompasses pro-democracy leaders' idea of the 'democratic self-determination' of Hong Kong, it is also used by radical localists to advocate for total independence. Studies find that the idea of joyous resistance promotes peaceful demonstrations and refrains from physical confrontations, allowing participants to be seen as radical in some ways but avoid causing obvious disruption (Ng & Chan 2018:108-9). This new form of resistance was first adopted by localist groups in Hong Kong protesting against urban redevelopment in 2009, but has since been incorporated into other movements, including the Umbrella Movement and the

Anti-ELAB Movement. While some participants believe that joyous resistance is an effective way to engage more citizens, radicals criticise it as weak and unserious and express doubts about its potential to contribute to real change.

Regardless of whether play leads to substantial outcomes in social movements, the joyful quality of activism is believed to be influential in fostering social relations within communities (Shepard 2011:23; Ng & Chan 2018:97). At the same time, research on playful forms of resistance should also attend to the emergence of everyday practices of joyous resistance (Ng & Chan 2018:110). In line with this argument, the present study proposes that engagement with playful, satirical content on social media in the everyday settings contributes to the cultivation of stronger social relations within civic communities. However, engagement of this kind is closely connected to the trust shared among community members and, to some degree, to the distrust directed towards perceived outgroups. This argument will be developed in the analytical chapters.

## Remembering social movements

Within the field of memory studies, activism has recently become the centre of scholarly attention, prompting scholars to declare an 'activist turn' in this research field (Chidgey 2023; Gutman & Wüstenberg 2023). Although the notion of an activist turn is not without its challenges, particularly because it may obscure the complex genealogy of current research debates and agendas, recent scholarship of memory and activism has elicited compelling new perspectives on the broader societal relevance of memory (Merrill & Rigney 2024: 998).

In terms of participation and duration, a social movement is a large-scale event that involves activists but is also witnessed and remembered by citizens at large. Shaping collective memories of social movements has the power to affect public opinion, as collective memories are a key to 'assert claims, mobilize supporters and legitimize their political visions' in all social movements (Berger, Scalmer & Wicke 2021:1). Interdisciplinary research on social movements and memory has been conducted to understand the role of memories in activism. Memory has been studied as a strategy for favouring an alternative narrative of the past (Langwald 2021:174) and argued to be a powerful influence that shapes and mobilises future movements (Doerr 2014:206).

Although more social movement researchers are interested in exploring how memory is mobilised in movements, they often focus on the narrative, discursive, and performative aspects of it, and few research have addressed how memory is being made inside movements (Doerr 2014). To fill this empirical gap, Doerr (2014:209) introduces a multidimensional conceptualisation of memory in movements that underlines the interrelations between different mnemonic forms. As

the scholar argues, it is crucial to acknowledge that the different forms of memory, such as verbal and visual forms, interact in ways that can complement, contradict or even conflict with each other. This approach to understand memory is key to this thesis as it highlights how conflicts within the present movements can become silenced memories in future storytelling practices, which, in turn, may either hinder or foster identities (Doerr 2014:223).

## Individual, collective, and cultural memories

In seeking the answers about the social functions of art in the early 20th century, German art historian Aby Warburg emphasises the significance of every piece of cultural artifact in human society (Forster 1976:169-171). What sets Warburg apart from other art historians at the time is that he rejects the common bias in art history that views primitive art as inferior to art from 'civilised' countries (Badea 2021:249). For Warburg, who was a pioneer in recognising the role of images as carrier of memory (Assmann 2008:110), the collection of seemingly random records and aesthetic creations is a crucial part of constructing a realistic representation of human development through their expression. Whether they are written journals or graphic representations, these creations serve a function to recall the established and hidden stories of how we develop as human and as societies (Forster 1976:171). In that context, Warburg's theory of memory highlights the roles of both individual and collective, in which he argues collective memory would be meaningless if not processed by individual memory (Wedepohl 2014:393).

This approach of shifting memory studies towards a cultural enquiry parallels Maurice Halbwachs's (1992 [1925]) concept of collective memory (Assmann 1995:125). For Halbwachs (1992:47), memory is a collective function that allows a group of people to feel a sense of togetherness through a common image of their past. While memory is constructed in the individual during communication (Pentzold 2009:258), collective memory is understood as a socially articulated and socially maintained reality of the past, rather than a collection of individual memories (Pentzold et al. 2023:1). Memories are socially acquired, recalled, recognised, and located, allowing for collective continuity and reconstructions of collective memory through traditions, as well as recreations of images and ideas in the present (Vromen 1993: 511). In essence, memories cannot be articulated without communication. Individual memories are inherently shaped by socio-cultural frameworks, and collective memory is not simply the collection of individual remembrances, as conflicting memories are also part of the constitution to the collective (van Dijck 2007:9-10). The socio-cultural framework differ from society to society, depending on various factors such as social norms, beliefs, values, and traditions. When it comes to shaping memories of past movements in Hong Kong for individuals and collectives, social media culture is gaining prominence as part of the framework. Instagram, in particular, has shown significance in shaping the

memories among younger citizens, with significant influences from local and international memetic culture and artistic contributions from creative workers.

Assmann (1995; 2008) expands on the notion of collective memory from Aby's and Halbwach's works by further distinguishing communicative memory from cultural memory. The concept of communicative memory—as informed by Halbwach's framework and emphasis on socialisation and communication—is constructed exclusively by everyday communication (Assmann 1995:126). It is regarded as a form of social memory tied to the recent past, limited to a temporal horizon and its carriers, and evolving from one generation to the next. Cultural memory, on the contrary, is distanced from the everyday, but not bounded by social time. It is another form of collective memory that preserves the cultural identity of a group (Assmann 1995:130), through stable formation, fixed organisation, established communicative institutions and a limited participation structure that involves only a limited number of people.

However, Pentzold et al. (2023:9) highlight the problematic division between communicative memory and cultural memory in digitally networked environments, as they argue that these two registers of memory are constitutively entangled within a networked society, where all spheres of life are impacted by the media. Van Dijck (2007:14-17) also questions the exclusion of media from concepts of collective memory, criticising the antagonistic relationship between memory and media that is often suggested in memory studies. She argues that media and memory are intertwined in the digital age, whether the former enhances, corrupts, extends or replaces the latter. Memories are not portrayals of past events or experiences; rather, but should be understood as present-day recollections of the past (Terdiman 1998:8; Pentzold et al. 2023:3). By the same token, mediated memories do not represent a fixed moment from the past but serves to foster ideas and relations between the past and present.

## Remembrance in the digital sphere

Today, the communication of collective memories is heavily impacted by the digitalisation of media and the networked environment. While some collective memories may still be partly preserved through interpersonal communication – such as conversations, photo albums or written journals – most objects, experiences, and personal memories are now mediatised in forms of text, audio, visual, and audiovisual in this age of social media. As van Dijck (2007:49) notes, we have become active producers and collectors of mediated memories. By collecting these memories and allowing ourselves to be informed by them, we can mediate relationships between individual and groups, as well as between the past and In researching activism and social movements in the digital age, media scholars have moved beyond an understanding of media as mere tools (Mattoni 2020:2830). More research focused on exploring the intersections between media and social movement

actors in different temporal aspects, including the entanglements of archiving and activism, activist memory and social media platforms in the digital age (Chidgey 2020; Andén-Papadopoulos 2023:674). In her study on YouTube videos as archives in activism, Askanius (2012) explains that new digital technologies have transformed the ways in which memory is archived, moving beyond the historically defined rules of archiving set by political, artistic, and economic elites. She writes:

> The online sphere is particularly potent in stimulating memento and narrating the past as new digital technologies makes instant recall possible and holds the promise of endless storage capacities. In this manner, with the Internet as an ever expanding and powerful vehicle of collecting, preserving and displaying the past, new forms of vernacular memory practice surface (Askanius 2012:16).

The acknowledgement of digital media platforms as alternative archives that give voice to the subordinate groups in society is crucial for understanding how social media content can be seen as cultural manifestations of vernacular remembrance and commemoration (Askanius 2012:17). As the study concludes, social media platforms operate as spaces for providing and negotiating memories of protests. At the same time, they allow for the sharing of collective memories of past protests that project an aesthetic of dissent that can mobilise activists to take future direct actions (Askanius 2012:13). From this standpoint, social media platforms can be seen as alternative representations of social movements that invite people to contribute to the sharing, discussion and production of visual evidence (Askanius 2012:21-2).

These developments in new digital archive practices have prompted the emergence of the concept of the 'living archive' in the interdisciplinary field of social movement and memory studies (Chidgey 2020). While Askanius (2012) presents new possibilities in relation to emancipating archival practices with regard to digital media concerning social movements, Chidgey stresses that these community archiving projects created by social movement participants are still dependent on institutional norms and practices and restricted by material limits (2020:240). Building on this, in her study on Syrian image activists, Andén-Papadopoulos proposes that living archives should be understood as a site of contested enunciation (2024:676). According to the scholar, in violent authoritarian contexts where trauma and forceful disappearance often occur, the act of archiving is often emotionally charged and politically significant (Andén-Papadopoulos 2024:684). Following this line of thinking, the living archive curated by members of the protest community should not be seen simply as data, but through a lens of the participants' personal emotional, and embodied attachment to the archives. As Andén-Papadopoulos explains:

> […] these records are not simply disembodied 'data' but part of the identity of the videographers and their communities, intimately linked to processes of memory, mourning and healing, and a crucial site of grassroots resistance and empowerment.

> In this view, what is most important about these records is their potential to help create and reshape current fields of action and hope in locally contested social and political fields. (2024:684).

In a similar vein, Keightley (2010) has explored the use of memory as both a methodological tool and as a research object. She argues that remembering is a performance that involves a process of selection, omission, and synthesis. Memory is both cultural and social, and the narratives of one's memory are negotiated according to the particular cultural and social frameworks in society aimed at strengthening social relationships, group affiliations, and collective consensus. To be communicable and thus serve the social dimension of society, memories are reconstructed as representations and encoded in different cultural productions such as films, speeches, as well as all kinds of everyday media (see also Terdiman 1993:8). These vehicles of memory play important roles in the navigation and construction of a relationship between past and present, in both private and public domains.

In Hong Kong, scholars also argue that remembering can be seen as a way of making sense of one's belonging and identity. In examining the role of media in shaping and sustaining personal memories of two mass protests in Hong Kong, Chu identified four key factors that have facilitated the endurance of personal memories of protests: feelings, emotions, beliefs, and forces of socialisation (2023:224). Based on this finding, the scholar argues that social connections are crucial in fostering remembrance, as our information about and knowledge of a movement is largely influenced by people around us (Chu 2024:260). Here, remembrance is believed to facilitate self-understanding and personal development in life. Despite people's strong intentions to remember, they often forget. While mnemonic devices and methods are central to facilitating remembrance, mnemonic practices are becoming increasingly reliant on technology, such as mobile phones and computers, along with their built-in reminder applications. Social media platforms have also integrated various functions to help users stay informed about past events, such as Instagram's 'memories' function, which allows users to interact with their previous posts that were published one or more years ago. With such functions, users are constantly encouraged to revisit their previous engagements and develop new ways of remembering (Serafinelli 2020:2).

While events are unfolding, memories are being made at the same time. Memories are often constructed by individual experience and triggered by the artefacts that are created and produced in everyday life. In Casey's phenomenological study on remembering, he argues that people must reclaim the responsibility of remembering, as computers are only capable of collecting and ordering the 'reduced residues' of human memories (2000:2). Remembering, as Casey states, is an intentional act that encompasses various forms (2000:48). He refers to these forms of remembering as mnemonic modes and identifies three distinctive forms: *reminding*, *reminiscing*, and

*recognising.* Reminding prompts a person to think of something that they might otherwise have forgotten to do or think; reminiscing refers to reliving past experiences with pleasure; and recognising provides a sense of familiarity through an experience. Each of these three modes involves external factors that motivate remembrance, be they tangible reminders, substantial discussions of reminiscing, or other people who are the subjects of perceptual recognition. Casey's conceptualisation of these modes of remembering offers this thesis a way to understand how remembrance of the protests is represented in and facilitated by images circulated within a digital environment. This theme will be explored in depth in Chapter 6.

# 4. Key Concepts for Exploring Civic Visuals

The analysis presented in this thesis is primarily shaped by two main conceptual perspectives: John Dewey's (1916; 1934) theories of aesthetics and democracy, and Peter Dahlgren's (2003; 2009) notion of civic culture in exploring the evolving relationship between media, citizenship, and political engagement. The first part of the framework is constructed with Dewey's pragmatic approach to examining art 'from below'. Dewey's philosophical discussions on art and aesthetics provide theoretical guidance for understanding the importance and meaning of seemingly ordinary artistic representations, particularly in how they convey significant cultural and political meanings within democratic life. The second part draws on the shared democratic perspective of Dewey and Dahlgren. Their respective discussions on democracy highlight the mundane aspects of everyday life, emphasising how aesthetics and cultural experiences emerge through ordinary practices and are embedded in commonplace objects. In this chapter, I lay the foundation for my argument and conceptual understanding of civic visuals by examining the works and ideas of Dewey and Dahlgren, particularly on aesthetics, civic engagement, and culture. As these scholars argue, democratic values are not only expressed through grand political gestures but are cultivated and sustained in the ordinary rhythms and materialities of daily existence. Viewing ordinary experiences as aesthetic with affective meanings will serve as a key approach for exploring how meanings are created through engagement with civic visuals. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I break down Dahlgren's analytical framework of civic culture and suggest how analysing visuals from a civic culture perspective will be a helpful approach to conceptualise and understand civic visuals within the evolving media and political landscape.

## Deweyan philosophies of democracy and aesthetics

The first part of the framework is informed by the theories developed by Dewey (1916; 1927;1934), who proposes a way of understanding the everyday through situating aesthetic experiences within ordinary contexts. While Dewey may not be frequently referenced in media studies, his engagement with cultural studies is

ubiquitous. His work is described as something that reads as 'narrative histories of cultures and concepts' that is grounded in his devotion to empiricism, a view that urges ideas and theories to be tested against experience (Decker 2003). However, his prominent position as a scholar of pragmatic democracy, with a strong focus on education, may have hindered the association of his theories with other social science fields, including media studies.

Dewey's principles of democratic education, which promote 'equality, collaboration, reflection, and communication' (Dzur 2008:121), have continued to shape the ongoing development of higher education today (Saltmarsh 2008:65). Throughout his work, Dewey sought to reform and revitalize American democracy along and within global dimensions. His philosophy has remained highly relevant in academia over the decades and continues to feature prominently in scholarly discussions on the rise of populism and other democratic crises such as the global trend of democratic backsliding (Pedersen 2019:77). As a prominent thinker of American democracy and a global philosopher who spent time in Europe, China, Turkey, and Mexico during the twentieth century (Narayan 2016:3), Dewey's political philosophy is widely regarded as one of the most prolific contributions to understanding American democracy in a global context (Dixon 2020:98). His democratic vision should therefore be considered relevant and valuable not only in Western contexts in the 1900s but also in today's 'globalised and interdependent world' (Narayan 2016:4).

Dewey's (1951) view on democracy as 'a way of life' aligns closely with this thesis' visually and culturally driven approach to examining civic engagement practices and evolvements in Hong Kong, particularly in highlighting individual participation and everyday experiences with attention to their aesthetic quality. For Dewey (1927:328), democracy is 'the idea of community life itself'. He asserted that a democracy is 'more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of co-joint communicated experience' (Dewey 1916:87). This democratic vision calls for a facilitating equal participation by all members in the processes of deliberation and formulation of social policy (Dewey 1916:93; Rosales 2012:157; Dixon 2020:102).

Dewey was also interested in extending the conception of democracy from the political sphere to other areas of life (Decker 2003). This is particularly evident in his view on aesthetic experience in everyday life, where he challenged frameworks that associate aesthetic expressions and experiences with a certain class. Dewey's 1934 book Art as Experience articulates his aesthetic philosophy from a grounded perspective, offering an insightful entry point for examining civic visuals as artistic creations and/or cultural artefacts within a creative community in developing political participation among citizens in a yet-to-be democratic society.

In this book, Dewey shares his aesthetic theories and proposes the idea of seeing *quality* as a function of nature, as opposed to a function in the subjective mind. From

this perspective, Dewey describes an aesthetic experience as something that involves 'anticipation, tension, and resistance' (Puolakka 2015). His democratic vision also comes into play in response to existing aesthetic theories of art, which he claims to fail to point at the right places and objects for experiencing works of art (Dewey 1934:4). In Dewey's view, democracy must begin at home (1927:213). Similarly, he believes that we must begin our way of understanding aesthetics in our own homes and streets—which he calls the 'raw' (Dewey 1934:4). Beginning with the raw indicates that, it is necessary to experience the artistic object in a non-art, everyday setting without a consciousness of appreciation (Puolakka 2015). Hence, he takes a critical stance towards aesthetic theories that distance art from other modes of experiencing within everyday contexts:

> […] theories which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous conditions. Embedded as they are in institutions and in habits of life, these conditions operate effectively because they work so unconsciously (Dewey 1934:9).

The emphasis on aesthetics from different modes of everyday experience, as well as the unconscious elements in artistic work, is central to Dewey's aesthetic theory. His aim to 'restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doing, and sufferings' (Dewey 1934:3) can be interpreted as an attempt to challenge the notion that fine arts are the sole gateway to aesthetic experiences, arguing instead that they are merely a conspicuous example of such experiences (Zeltner 1975:3). As Dewey (1934:12) explains, giving attention to the mundane and ordinary may seem insignificant within the field of art, but is an indispensable means of fully appreciating art in its ultimate everyday form.

This perspective stems from Dewey's concern that we may hesitate to regard things that hold the greatest significance in everyday life as art, due to doubts about their intentionality (Dewey 1934:24). However, he believes that mundane tasks and everyday objects can embody artistic engagement (Dewey 1934:4). Grounded in his notion of democracy as a way of life, Dewey's philosophy of aesthetics parallels the idea that any member of the public has something valuable to contribute to the public culture of democracy (Saltmarsh 2008:66). By the same token, the ordinary objects surrounding us in everyday life, such as domestic utensils and furnishing, also bear value in shaping the rhythm of daily life and serve as expressions of skill and identity (Dewey 1934:148). For Dewey (1934:6), these objects enhance the processes of everyday life in their own time and place, just as ancient silverware displayed in museums was once recognised as nothing more than ordinary household items. Yet, once such objects attain a classic status and become isolated from the ordinary, they may reflect cultural prestige but lose their connection to the familiar experiences of everyday lives. Dewey highlights the irony of how common

it is to overlook the aesthetics of these objects while they maintain a salient presence in our everyday life. Consequently, as objects become increasingly distanced from our day-to-day, people begin to notice their aesthetic qualities and seek to experience them in a different way.

The Deweyan perspective also underlines the importance of emotional qualities in rounding out an *aesthetic experience*. An aesthetic experience, as Dewey explains, departs from an interest for the experience to take place and to encounter certain things during the experience, and a desire for the outcomes (1934:39). In other words, art as experience has a unifying quality that is brought by emotions. Unity and completeness are emotional qualities that distinguish non-aesthetic or 'anesthetic' experiences from aesthetic experiences, in which emotions and engagement are the forces that bring unity in and through different parts of an experience and qualify the experience as aesthetic (Dewey 1934:40-1). During such an experience, emotional qualities often shift and change as the experience develops. The moving and changing of emotions in different parts of the experience create a relationship between the initial and new phases, forming a sense of unity (Dewey 1934:44; Leddy & Puolakka 2023).

Dewey interprets anaesthetic experiences as those lacking genuine initiations and endings, such as the humdrum routines and the slackness of loose ends (1934:40). Such experiences can easily be replaced according to Dewey, as they neither develop nor evolve from previous experiences. From this perspective, anaesthetic experiences are defined, among some other things, by their incoherence, the lack of interest in controlling what shall be organised into developing the experience, mere submission to conventions or slackness, and ultimately, the absence of a sense of unity.

For Dewey, aesthetic theories require as much broadening as democratic theories. He puts forth the idea that an aesthetic dimension is embedded in civic life, ideally within a democracy where the public can participate in cooperative, participatory experiences (Decker 2003; Saltmarsh 2008:66). Overall, Dewey's emphasis on aesthetics in understanding civic engagement urges for reflections on public and democratic projects as lived experiences, with attention to their emotional qualities and dimensions (Decker 2003).

## The Legacy of Dewey's Aesthetics

Dewey's consistent emphasis on democracy throughout his work has continued to influence various domains of philosophy over the years (Rosales 2012:160; Berleant 2013). While his thinking has, as earlier discussed, been widely admired by scholars in educational philosophy and civic engagement (Saltmarsh 2008:63), his views on aesthetics have attracted both criticism and defence. Given that Deweyan aesthetics emphasises everyday experience, his descriptions of 'an experience' as a rare

occurrence have raised questions from contemporary scholars in art and aesthetics (Puolakka 2015). Saito (2007), a prominent theorist within everyday aesthetics, argues that the underlying notion of Dewey's view is that aesthetic experiences are not ordinary but occur only under special conditions. According to Saito (2007:44-5), Dewey's characterisation of the ordinary and anaesthetic experience as 'lose succession' without clear beginnings or endings denies everyday experience the status of aesthetic experience.

However, others have defended Dewey by highlighting the core of his pragmatism: 'his belief that the human condition can be improved' (Puolakka 2015). Dewey maintains that democracy implies continuous evolutiom. As he writes, 'where everything is already complete, there is no fulfilment' (Dewey 1934:17). Dewey's descriptions of the everyday should therefore be interpreted not as simple affairs encountered by individuals in the present day, but as a general account of the everyday experience in the early 1900s (Puolakka 2015). According to Puolakka (ibid.), Dewey's aesthetic theories reflect his democratic vision and aspiration for a world that becomes a better place grounded in community life. For Dewey, an aesthetic environment is where improvement and enhancement are made possible through the practice of community. Through engaging in 'conjoint, combined, associated action' (Saltmarsh 2008:64), individuals will be able to experience and appreciate aesthetics.

Others have also noted that aesthetic experience has transformed since Dewey's time. According to Berleant (2009), although Dewey's theories emancipated aesthetics from its traditional constraints in the twentieth century, these changes must be acknowledged when considering how aesthetics are appreciated today. However, while aesthetic theory should keep pace with the changes, it should never attempt to legislate them (ibid.). Building on Dewey's work, Berleant (2013) draws attention to the significance of active participation when it comes to understanding aesthetic engagement. This conception of aesthetic engagement bridges the gap between the viewer and the art object, as well as between the artist and the viewer. It urges scholars to recognise that aesthetic value arises not from the artwork or the viewer alone, but from the perceptual participation between the artist and the viewer. Berleant (2009) considers the notion of aesthetic engagement as a response to the challenge posed by the broadening scope and quality of human experience, and as the foundation of aesthetic theories of the individual arts.

Taken together, the Deweyan perspective on democracy and aesthetics urges 'an openness of vision' that rejects the distinction between the political and other areas in life (Decker 2003). His pragmatism and empiricism insisted that theories should be rigorously challenged (Highmore 2011:38). In an attempt to dovetail Dewey's art experience theory with current media studies, I will now return to Dahlgren's work on civic engagement.

## Civic talk as engagement

For Dahlgren (2013:78), Dewey's positive approach has shaped his own perspectives on the matter of civic culture. When Dahlgren (2002:6) unpacks what he means by the 'talkative public', he argues that 'talk is seen as constitutive of publics, which is both morally and functionally vital for democracy'. He criticises the downplay of talk by existing political theories of democracy. These theories either take talk among citizens for granted or emphasise the insufficient knowledge of citizens. To distance himself from this school of thought and to draw attention to the importance of talk, Dahlgren turns to Dewey (1927). Instead of putting a focus on the incompetence of citizens, Dewey regards everyday talk as an important step in civic engagement. Both Dahlgren's and Dewey's views on democracy have a strongly cultural approach that does not take everyday attributes for granted in the discussion of public engagement in the constitution of democracy. It is reasonable to say that both are interested in the questions of how to facilitate and improve people's opportunities for involvement, engagement, influence, and impact in democratic processes (Miegel & Olsson 2013:11-2). This resemblance between Dahlgren's and Dewey's thinking is particularly reflected in their notions of civic culture and democracy, respectively. They share an interest in the importance of the pedagogical dimension of democratic society and the interrelationship between democracy and education. They also underscore the relevance of recognising the individual's sense of belonging to a community, as it allows individuals to establish relationships and involve themselves in society, potentially exercising real influence on political affairs and other matters (Miegel & Olsson 2013:12). More significantly, these two notions stress the importance of culture and emotions in the exploration of civic participation.

Dalgren's notion of civic culture directly addresses the questions of why and how people participate in the public sphere by taking the cultural perspective into account in the examination of practical features and dynamics of civic engagement (Dahlgren 2002:19). Civic culture offers an analytical framework that aims to understand discussions among citizens as something embedded within other cultural dimensions. Dahlgren argues for the importance of paying attention to the features in the socio-cultural realm that constitute everyday pre-conditions for democratic participation. He claims that these preconditions can be identified through observation of a wide range of cultural attributes, and that it is therefore important to investigate the cultural meanings embedded in civic participation and understand how these meanings bond and link people together within civic cultures.

When civic talk is destroyed by power from above, democracy is challenged. Although Hong Kong has never been an entirely democratic society, the public did not experience the censorship of its day-to-day conversations until the events of the 2020s, when the National Security Law was enacted. Before that, the media and the public largely enjoyed freedom of the press and free speech. Eligible citizens could

also participate in legislative and district council elections. This is still possible today, but the candidates for these elections are now more restricted to pro-government politicians. The media has been serving as the fourth pillar of democracy in the region for decades, and the public was invited to engage in public forums to openly express their voices and opinions about any politicians, parties, government officials, and policies. Therefore, even if Hong Kong cannot be classified as an established democratic society, under this so-called 'hybrid regime', the value of democracy has always been important to the public.

Modalities of engagement are one of the parameters that Dahlgren and Hill (2023:24) use to study engagement, presented in their model of 'the spectrum of media engagement'. Building on Papacharissi's (2015) writings on affective public and the significance of affective expressions in political discourse, Dahlgren and Hill introduce a new perspective on researching engagement in media studies, calling attention to the significance of the modes of engagement. They argue for two different yet often intertwined modes of engagement: affective and cognitive (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:30). On the one hand, the affective mode builds upon the emotional structures within a particular narrative, genre, or live event, in which audiences are invited to engage themselves through subjective feelings. The cognitive mode, on the other hand, emphasises critical thinking, in which knowledge is required to engage with a political issue (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:30). Within each mode, the engagement can be categorised as either positive or negative—or, in some cases, as disengagement.

This mode of affective engagement is crucial to understanding how younger generations engage with political discussions on digital platforms. Younger citizens often share their political expressions on social media using 'humorous, cynical, vibrant, or exaggerated' approaches (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2024:5), frequently incorporating popular culture references. These expressions can appear somewhat strange or indecipherable to outsiders, as they are driven by emotions and can be deeply personal. Yet this emotional and personal mode of political engagement that reflects an individual's lived experiences and the impact of political issues in their everyday life highlights the evolving practice of political expression among younger citizens. By integrating their everyday experiences and personal emotions regarding broader political and societal concerns, younger citizens foster a stronger sense of engagement and shape discussions in ways that resonate with their peers. This mode of engagement also promotes positive affective commitments within a community, such as trust. As Jasper (2014:35) notes, affective commitments allow members to support each other without thoroughly evaluating each other's arguments or positions. This often fosters trust and solidarity based on shared emotions and experiences, rather than the critical analysis of every detail of one another's viewpoints. This kind of support is rooted in a sense of mutual understanding and shared values, which can strengthen community bonds and collective action. Although actions driven by emotions may sometimes lead to

unconscious mistakes, Jasper (2014:35) suggests that it is more important to reflect and adjust these actions upon realising the mistake. This reflective process allows individuals to learn from their experiences within a community.

Although Instagram users do not engage as members of one social or political community, they do constantly engage with the images and interact with each other on the platform based on shared emotions and experiences—and more importantly, a sense of mutual understanding and solidarity. Drawing from Jasper's conceptualisation of affective communities, in this thesis, I will refer to these users interchangeably as citizens, creators, artists, contributors, and members of an affective community.

## Civic culture as an analytical framework

Dahlgren's concept of civic cultures suggests that in a democratic system, shared commitment to the vision and procedures of democracy is important (2003:156). By the same token, the framework of civic cultures does not overlook the differences between social and cultural groups in terms of their ways of expressing political engagement. Instead, this approach provides insights into these nuances in the processes of how different groups and individuals find ways to establish or sustain a democratic society in everyday life. This framework also places strong emphasis on media, and specifically that of social media in political activism (Uldam & Askanius 2013:7). In his early conceptualisation of the civic cultures framework, Dahlgren (2000; 2005; 2009) reflects extensively on the potential of digital media to enhance practices and processes of civic participation necessary for building a democratic system. In his more recent work, however, he highlights how the internet is scrutinising their potential capacity to undermine political agency (Dahlgren 2018).

According to Dahlgren, civic culture can be seen as a dynamic circuit composed of six dimensions (2003:156). The six dimensions include: knowledge, values, trust, practices, identities, and spaces (Dahlgren 2009:108). In this circuit, these dimensions are integrated and overlapped with each other in mutual reciprocity. This multidimensional framework offers an analytical entry point for media scholars interested in the relationship between the cultural and the political, particularly in understanding citizens' engagement in politics and the fostering of cultural citizenship in the digital age (Uldam & Askanius 2013; Couldry et al. 2014; Doona 2016).

Following this line of enquiry within the field of media and communication studies, I apply Dahlgren's framework in my empirical analysis, in order to demonstrate awareness and acknowledgement of the 'messiness of everyday engagement as part of being political' (Uldam & Askanius 2013:1190). In particular, I will use all six

elements of the civic circuit to explore engagement with civic visuals online. In the following section, I will briefly address each dimension in the framework with reference to Dahlgren (2003; 2009; 2018). At the end, I will address some limitations of the current framework and offer notes on the changing dynamics within the framework in the contemporary political landscape.

As a circuit, there is no order in introducing the dimensions. Still, some dimensions hold more prominence than others, and one of the cornerstones in civic cultures is *knowledge*. In this context, knowledge should not be understood as mere information or political savvy. Rather, we should approach knowledge as the integration of new information with lived experience and other existing frames of reference (Dahlgren 2018:21). It is fundamental for the facilitation of political participation and stands out as a foundation for democracy. Education serves as a foundation for citizens to obtain civic knowledge, and the media plays a significant role in generating, disseminating, and facilitating the acquisition of this knowledge.

However, Dahlgren contends that digital technologies are reshaping the foundations of knowledge amidst the continuous rise of social media. He refers to Berardi's (2015) argument that as our independence on digital information grows, digital media are undermining peope's 'known world', rather than empowering them. From this perspective, people's general ability to think and reflect critically is diminishing (Dahlgren 2018:23).

The rapid changes in digital technologies are giving rise to growing concerns about the ways in which our knowledge processes are being transformed. As new modes of civic knowledge emerge—with new thoughts and expressions—ways of knowing are no longer confined to one single and dominant mode. While this fosters democratic pluralism in terms of promoting civic knowledge, Dahlgren emphasises the need to critically assess the effectiveness of different modalities of knowledge for civic agency, especially with regard to existing power relations. The present study argues that civic knowledge is a key prerequisite for the engagement with civic visuals, as it provides the basis for contextualising and interpreting the artwork. However, it is also through civic visuals that the exchanges of civic and cultural knowledge are facilitated and archived. The analytical chapters of this thesis will also demonstrate how participants in civic cultures mobilise.

The next part of the circuit is *values*. A political system cannot achieve a democratic nature if everyday life reflects anti-democratic norms. According to Dahlgren, values can be sorted into two main categories: substantive and procedural (2009:110). Substantive values include equality, solidarity, liberty, and justice, while procedural values emphasise the promotion of societal processes such as openness, tolerance, discussion, and responsibility. For Dahlgren, shared democratic values provide a common foundation for the unfolding of political conflicts; shared values merely create a common communicative culture and do not eliminate antagonisms. While the mass media have traditionally reinforced

democratic values, the rise of social media has significantly enhanced the circulation of information and facilitated both horizontal and vertical communication, offering substantial potential for democratic discourse. Commitment to democratic values involves an element of passion, which can evoke response, engagement, and action. This passion, according to Dahlgren, is the foundation of the civic virtue that defines ideal civic behaviour.

Again, Dahlgren's optimistic view of social media's political potential has faced more challenges in recent years (Uldam & Askanius 2013:1191; Dahlgren 2018). Increasing social media surveillance and censorship imposed by states and platforms have resulted in self-censorship along with other practices that hinder the expression of democratic values online. Dahlgren argues that while the vast media development of the past decade has cultivated civic cultures in various ways, these changes have also created problems surrounding democratic participation (2018:21). In this regard, it is necessary for the present study to show awareness of the nuanced relation between social media and civic engagement. To explore the dimension of values in civic cultures, the analytical chapters will delve deeper into the topics of commitment and expressions of shared democratic and cultural values in civic visual engagement.

The next key dimension is *trust*. In civic cultures, trust is the pillar of democracy, with the general perception being that more trust leads to a healthier democratic system, while less trust signals potential trouble. In this dynamic, citizens are the bearers of trust, and institutions or government representatives are the objects of trust. Dahlgren's interest, however, lies primarily in the trust among or between groups of citizens. Politics inherently involves conflicts of interest and opposing identities, which introduce an element of mistrust into these social relationships from the outset. This mistrust can complicate the democratic process, and the cultivation of trust among citizens is thus crucial for a functioning democracy. As Dahlgren argues, a modest level of trust is required for the formations of groups, networks, and social movements. Here, trust also extends to the confidence that citizens have in accessible information and related knowledge (Dahlgren 2018:20).

On the other hand, distrust in politics and the media has been intensified of late by a sense of powerlessness (Dahlgren 2018:24). Dahlgren posits that citizens are recognising and calling out deception in their political systems instigated by the power elites and other actors who engage in spreading disinformation. Once more, the rise in civic cynicism is not exclusive to the West. As I noted in Chapter 2, Hong Kong is experiencing similar challenges surrounding the public's growing distrust in traditional media and political polarisation on social media, as well as the rise of echo chambers in digital spaces. Social media platforms and online forums are becoming increasingly hostile environments (Lee, Coe & Kim 2018) in which hate speech and personal attacks target those who hold differing opinions and are therefore deemed as untrustworthy. Due to all the turbulences surrounding the wide dissemination of disinformation and propaganda, the citizens of Hong Kong are

more engaged in fact-checking. During the Anti-ELAB movement, multiple liberal-leaning fact-checkers were established on social media to debunk anti-protest rumours and disinformation (Lee 2026:34). This emergence of fact-checkers and increased engagement with online fact-checking have attracted the attention of scholars interested in how they are becoming part of the dynamics of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation (Tsang et al. 2023; Lee 2026:34). The erosion of trust—between citizens and government, citizens and media, and even between citizens themselves—must be addressed in contemporary research on civic engagement. How citizens engage with civic issues and express their political interests when the state tightens its control over society cannot be fully understood without taking this deepening epistemic crisis of democracy into account.

The framework is further expanded by the introduction of the concept of *space*. Democracy thrives when citizens can connect and communicate with each other. Access to fellow citizens and representatives, as well as to the communicative spaces in which policy discussions and decision-making occur, is an indispensable element for the development of collective political efforts. While physical communicative spaces are essential in civic cultures, Dahlgren emphasises that citizens must feel that these spaces are accessible and available for civic purposes. Knowing how to find, use, and create these spaces contributes to the practices and skills that strengthen civic cultures. Especially in light of the proliferation of diverse online platforms, the media significantly enhance opportunities for civic engagement, allowing civic cultures to develop and flourish both offline and online. However, although in-person communicative spaces and encounters become less dominant in the digital era, Dahlgren argues that we must not overlook their potential to complement and enrich mediated encounters. As the present thesis argues, civic visuals can be understood as a playful space for participation in civic talk—one that is distanced but not completely detached from reality.

The next dimension brings us to the discussion of *practices*. For Dahlgren, this term refers to the concrete, recurring practices that generate personal and social meaning surrounding the ideals of democracy. As important aspects of civic cultures, individual, group, and collective practices are foundations for a democratic society. Crucial practices in a civic culture include routine forms of practice such as elections, as well as those that are embedded in everyday life, such as meetings and discussions among citizens. Over time, practices develop into traditions and collective memory. According to this line of thinking, new practices and traditions are constantly and simultaneously evolving, thereby ensuring progressive democratic change. From the standpoint of civic agency, knowledge and practices are considered the most immediately empowering dimensions of Dahlgren's dynmic circuit, as these are also the dimension upon which citizens can regularly reflect on in the development of their civic agency.

Now, we turn to the last dimension in the circuit, *identities.* In this context, identities are at the core of civic cultures, mutually influencing the other five dimensions within the civic circuit and shaping the conditions for their existence. For example, identities build on knowledge and values and can be reinforced by trust. As a dynamic aspect of civic culture, identities cannot be understood from a single perspective. Individuals often possess multiple identities simultaneously, such as those of a citizen, activist, and student. These identities develop and evolve through emotionally based experiences and can be strengthened by shared values or challenged by conflicts and distrust within groups. For most individuals, civic identities occupy a minor position within their overall identity compared to formal citizenship—the recognised membership of a citizen of a particualr state—which is the most fundamental source of civic identity for many, especially those not particularly engaged in specific political issues. Beyond formal citizenship, civic identity comprises two key components: the sense of being an empowered political agent and membership in one or more political communities. Empowerment involves actualising participation and is reinforced by the same. Membership in political communities transcends borders, emphasising a shared sense of belonging to a 'we' group, as opposed to a 'they' group. Community-based identities strongly resonate with the dimension of trust, as citizens must cooperate to make political interventions. It is important to recognise that political communities change with evolving circumstances, with membership identities becoming simultaneously more multidimensional and more flexible.

In summary, through the conceptualisation of civic cultures, Dahlgren lays out how the dimensions of knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices, and identities are key to the vitality and survival of democracy (Dahlgren 2018:20). However, it is in the light of the current dynamics of democratic backsliding across the globe that certain parts of civic cultures must be refined and revisited. In relation to various development in information technologies, Dahlgren himself has addressed the problems concerning the growing distrust of media and new forms of digitally derived knowledge, resulting in what he calls 'an epistemic crisis' (Dahlgren 2018). For Dahlgren, processes of knowledge production are unavoidably altered by the increasingly fast-moving information environment, resulting in challenges to knowledge development as our attention becomes increasingly fragmented (Dahlgren 2018:22). As our everyday life becomes more dependent on digital technologies, so do our ways of generating knowledge.

Social media users in particular are being constantly fed with information of all sorts, delivered straight to the palm of their hands. While it can be argued that the scope of the information we can easily access has widened when it comes to what is within our reach, it should not be overlooked that the information that reaches end users is selected or filtered—by the authorities, technology companies, and algorithms. Not only do new algorithmic methods determine the type of information we get, but digital media are also now shaping how we human beings see the world

in which we live (Dahlgren 2018:23). As Dahlgren explains, growing distrust and shifts in knowledge construction in current society may lead people away from taking the detour to fact-check information, redirecting them to shortcuts that hinder reasoned analysis (2018:26).

While the model of civic cultures presents a rather flexible approach by which to gain insights into communities and their citizenship-building practices (Couldry 2014:616), it is not without limitations. As Uldam and Askanius point out, applying some of the more abstract pars of the model, such as identities and space, can prove challenging in empirical analysis (2013:1190). Emphasising the framework's nondeterministic structure and the interrelations among its six dimensions, the scholars propose a synthesised approach to using the model that involves merging interrelated elements in the analysis (ibid.). Inspired by this analytical strategy, the present thesis explores the six dimensions of Dahlgren's civic cultures framework by discussing them in an interwoven manner. With the aid of the civic circuit and attention to the recent changes in the media and political landscapes, this thesis sets out to develop a broader understanding of civic engagement in a precarious political context through an exploration of the concept of civic visuals.

# 5. Research Design and Methods

This thesis is grounded in empirical research on the evolvement of civic talk and expressions in the social media environment, specifically on Instagram as a site of research in post-NSL Hong Kong. To answer the research questions, a qualitative multimethod approach is employed to investigate various forms of qualitative data (Creswell 2015). In particular, a toolbox of visual methods is used to collect and analyse the visual material. The collection and analysis of empirical material in this study are guided by perspectives from media and communication studies, visual culture, and social movement studies. The first part of this chapter gives an overview of the qualitative research design, introducing the empirical material and motivations for this digital ethnographic study using an unobtrusive, iconographic sampling approach. The second part presents the methods and details surrounding data collection, in terms of how the walkthrough method and iconography are used to guide the sampling process. The third part presents a multimethod approach to the critical analysis of the visual and textual material.

## Research design

Instagram was selected as the site of research for two key reasons: it has been identified in previous research as a significant platform for social mobilisation in Hong Kong, and its use facilitates data collection. Firstly, Instagram's influence among teenagers and its mobilisation power are highlighted in several studies (Yuen & Tang 2023; Haq et al. 2023; Mak & Poon 2023; Li 2025). For instance, Yuen & Tang (2023:712) find that young protesters with fewer resources tended to rely more heavily on this platform for disseminating protest-related information and mobilising resources. Users' networks on Instagram were also found to correlate with political engagement in the course of the Anti-ELAB Movement, during which activists adapted to the platform's highly visual nature by using images, symbols, and embedded texts to share protest-related content (Haq et al. 2022:3735). Moreover, Instagram plays a significant role in what Mak and Poon (2023:1112-1113) describe as 'political food social media influencers' in Hong Kong—individuals who promote an alternative and subtle form of civic engagement among pro-democracy citizens by encouraging food consumption based on businesses' political stances. Secondly, many public Instagram accounts that were active in

sharing and disseminating visual content during the social movements still exist on the platform today. This facilitated data collection, as much of the content remained accessible at the time of data sampling. Additionally, while some accounts are no longer active (but still accessible) on the platform, others have continued to share content related to civic issues; or remain active but contribute less frequently to civic or political content creation. The ongoing visibility and engagement of these accounts allow for observation of transitions and development over time, aligning with this thesis's interest in examining the afterlife of visual protest culture in Hong Kong.

First and foremost, given the strong focus in the research design on visual materials and consequently on visual methods, this author aims to address critiques often directed at studies employing visual methods in the social sciences, particularly criticism of the validity of the researcher's interpretation of images (Doerr & Milman 2014:427). To enhance the validity of the analysis, Doerr and Milman (2014:427) underlines the significance in social movement studies of triangulating interpretations of images with other sources, such as interviews with activists. As Davidson et al. (2023:2054) state, there are mainly two ways of collecting data from social media platforms: through recruiting participants or through collecting data straight from platforms. While the former requires user consent and participation, the latter involves unobtrusive approaches. During the pilot stage of this project (around 2020-2021), approaching and getting responses from potential research participants was less challenging. However, in light of ongoing political developments and the tightening of online surveillance in Hong Kong, a sense of fear, exhaustion, and weariness (Tarrow 2011) about engaging in political talk can be observed through participants' disengagement from participation. In the current precarious environment, conducting qualitative interviews that involve in-depth discussions of political opinions has proven ethically and practically challenging. Potential risks to participants must be carefully considered, as these interviews generate highly sensitive personal data that could pose a threat if accessed by third parties through any means. Following the *Guide to the Ethical Review of Research on Humans* published by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023), potential risks of conducting interviews with participants from Hong Kong and potential harm to research participants have been thoroughly evaluated. Due to the sensitivity involved in this research and the associated risks, the data triangulation in this study draws on existing resources and refrains from collecting additional personal data through in-depth interviews. Accordingly, only publicly accessible data, including textual and visual content reflecting users' engagement and interactions on Instagram, have been collected for research purposes.

These method choices have both limitations and strengths. On one hand, they provide valuable insights into civic engagement that reflect the practices of users and interactions between them on Instagram, without directly involving participants and collecting identifiable information. As Ardévol (2013:78) posits, while face-to-

face observation does not occur, a substantial amount of visual data, such as the emojis and images used to convey messages, constitutes key visual aspects in the observation of participants in an online ethnographic study. On the other hand, the absence of direct participant voices means that in-depth perspectives and reflections on personal experiences are not captured in the data. However, when a study involves uncertainties, transgressive ambiguous boundaries (Glasius et al. 2018:9), it is of paramount importance that the safety of the participants is not taken for granted. In addition, the richness of publicly available data on the internet should not be overlooked. As Hine argues, such data are significant to social research in terms of both quality and quantity (2015:160). She suggests that an unobtrusive ethnographic approach should be regarded as a productive way to explore certain questions about everyday practices that are otherwise difficult to access (Hine 2015:160). Similarly, Lee posits that participants often alter their behaviour during interviews (when they are aware of being studied), aiming to present themselves in a favourable light (2019: 492). Unobtrusive methods are therefore seen as an additional or alternative way for researchers to gain more authentic insights into their research subjects.

To demonstrate the nuances and different angles of participation on this social media platform, this study draws on a multimethod approach (Meyer 2021:360; Creswell 2015). Two sets of qualitative data were collected for this study. Firstly, visual content shared by users on Instagram, i.e., digital illustrations, serves as the primary set of empirical data. Secondly, I collected embedded texts in forms of captions and comments on the Instagram posts. This secondary data serves as contextualising material and facilitates the triangulation of the visual analysis at the same time, thereby yielding a more contextualised analysis that incorporates the intertextual meaning of the user engagement on Instagram as a whole. By combining visual and textual analyses, this study contributes to the production of knowledge that is informed by both the researcher's critical interpretations based on the visual analysis and the perspectives of Instagram users reflected in the textual analysis.

## Data collection methods

As discussed earlier, Instagram was selected as the site of research due to its significant influence in Hong Kong citizens' everyday social media use, but more particularly because of its significant role in mobilising pro-democracy citizens, especially the younger generation, in activism and social movements (Haq et al. 2022:3728). In its simplest form, Instagram is a social media platform that allows users to instantly share photographs. It was launched in 2010 as a mobile app designed to accommodate the growing popularity of mobile photography and has since evolved into a vast platform hosting not only photography but various forms of visual content (Leaver et al. 2020). In their comprehensive analysis of the

platform, Leaver and colleagues (2020) argue that Instagram should be understood as a 'conduit of communication' within the increasingly expansive landscape of visual social media culture, with its visual focus being central to its success. By September 2025, Instagram has reached 3 billion monthly active users (Reuters 2025), highlighting its extensive reach and the volume of visual content that it produces on a regular basis. Compared to other platforms such as X and Facebook, Instagram is more associated with everyday life and aesthetic experiences (San Cornelio 2023:189). The platform's emphasis on visual content encourages the creation of visually appealing and engaging posts, attracting users with its aesthetic appeal and leading them to associate their engagement on the platform with positive emotions (Bouko 2024:78). Nevertheless, Instagram is a highly commercialised platform that is constantly blurring the boundaries between organic and commercial content (Hübner, Thalmann & Henseler 2025).

Beyond its role as a lifestyle platform, Instagram has been used for advocacy and digital activism. For example, the carousel post feature native to Instagram has been repurposed by activists as a visual means to educate and inform the public (Ledford & Salzona 2022:258). Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers (2022) discuss the emergence of slideshow activism on Instagram as a vehicle for civic engagement, suggesting that the platform's visual aesthetics provide a 'successful recipe' for visual activism, encouraging citizens to stay informed and engaged on a wide range of political issues. Instagram also facilitates artivism, a delocalised social media activist phenomenon, which involves the circulation of political art through social networks (Rodal, Castillo & Sánchez 2019).

Despite the desire of significant groups of Instagram users for their political actions to be visible on the platform (Leaver et al. 2020), most digital activism research is situated on Facebook, X, and Reddit. While Instagram may receive relatively little attention in studies of online political engagement, it is important to note that the platform has the most restrictive access for academic research among these platforms (San Cornelio 2023:190). Instagram's closed technical system constantly introduces new methodological challenges for researchers. The platform does not provide access to its users' data and usage patterns available through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), and access to Instagram data has been restricted since 2018 (Bainotti et al. 2020:3657). Additionally, the app frequently updates its features and functions, complicating the documentation of the research process and slowing down data collection. While researchers have been advocating for broad-based access to social media data and custom APIs for scholarly research (Bruns 2018), access to Instagram data remains in the hand of Meta, the mother company of Facebook, which determines which research projects can gain access based on their topic and field (Laestadius & Witt 2022:586). The shutdown in 2024 of CrowdTangle, Meta's social media analytic tool for researchers, has further jeopardised data access for those studying Meta-owned platforms including Instagram and Facebook (Brown et al. 2024:2). Yet these challenges have

demonstrated why Instragram research remains as important as ever. As social media researchers point out, it is imperative that social media data access is not entirely ceded to the private sector (Laestadius and Witt 2022:586). Despite challenges in accessing the platform's data, Instagram remains a crucial site for research, due to its particular aesthetics and affordances, the richness of its publicly available data, and its significant role in many users' everyday lives (Highfield and Leaver 2014; Leaver & Highfield 2016:34; Leaver et al. 2020; Laestadius & Witt 2022:584).

While digital platforms undergo rapid development, researchers advocate for the need for constantly evolving methods for research situated on these platforms (Atay 2020:269; Are 2022:829). For Atay (2020:272), digital ethnographies present reflexive, creative, critical, evocative, and poetic first-person narratives by which to explore how cultural identities are presented in digital spaces. However, given the strong visual focus of this research, a more explicitly visually driven approach is also required. To grasp the growing significance of visual content and visual action, the incorporation into ethnographic studies of visual methods when analysing visual social media is substantially important for such studies (Postill & Pink 2012; Ardévol 2013; Hand 2017; Luhtakallio & Meriluoto 2022). The qualitative research in this thesis adopts a multimethod approach (Creswell 2015:3) that collects multiple forms of qualitative data by using a combination of various qualitative methods (Silverman 2020:402). Drawing inspiration from ethnographic studies that adopt the walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018) to study social media platforms and their users' practices (Jenzen 2017; Leaver et al. 2020; Richter & Ye 2023), I combine a walkthrough on Instagram with an iconographic sampling approach to generate both visual and textual forms of empirical data. This qualitative approach is both empirically and visually driven and aims to delve deep into the symbolic representation and visual practices enabled by the platform.

## An Instagram walkthrough

The first step of data collection was informed by the walkthrough method proposed by Light and colleagues (2018). This method incorporates ethnographic elements and fosters researchers' direct engagement with the platform's interface by traversing the app themselves. Building on a cultural studies foundation, the walkthrough method emphasises the symbolic and representational elements of Instagram (Light et al. 2018:884). This approach highlights the cultural objects within the app, giving prominence to the cultural research skills and mundane actions involved in the study of apps. Across different apps, a technical walkthrough involves three common stages: registration and entry; everyday use, and suspension, closure, and leaving (Light et al. 2018: 892-895). According to the scholars, these stages are central to the data-gathering process, which allows researchers to engage with the app interface as they scroll through feeds, explore menus, and tap buttons.

This method emphasises cultural research skills in textual and semiotic analysis, as cultural discourses embedded *in* the app demand understanding of existing cultural texts *outside* of it (Light et al. 2018.:891). The authors posit that by following the step-by-step walkthrough technique, researchers can analytically examine the app's features and functionalities by mimicking a user's everyday use of the app (Light et al. 2018:882). For instance, Leaver and colleagues (2020) employed the walkthrough method to examine the visual identity of Instagram by analysing visual elements presented in the feeds, profiles, stories, posts, and filters available on the iPhone version of the Instagram app.

This author adopted the walkthrough technique by making observations and documenting Instagram's screens and features through screenshots and screen recordings (Light et al. 2018:891), with a focus on searching for mundane symbols used in protest-related content. While the walkthrough method provided a step-by-step guide to analysing the use of apps, it was important to employ the method with Instagram-specific features in mind. Under these circumstances, I explored the three stages of data collection with alterations intended to tailor the method to this particular platform.

The walkthrough began with registration and entry to the platform. Initially, I registered an account for research purposes using a dummy email, but after a few days, Instagram deactivated the account. I assumed that the platform had identified it as a bot or unusual account, based on its activities and regular searches. Although it was possible to keep setting up new accounts, I believed that continuing the process with my personal account would enable a less challenging and disrupted research process. Using my personal account also allowed me to experience the platform as a genuine user with real connections and activities on the app. Nevertheless, this minor setback in the first stage of the walkthrough confirms how access to Instagram data is predominantly dictated by the platform, which determines what data are available and how they can be accessed (Laestadius & Witt 2022:588).

Using my personal account showed another advantage as I began the second stage of the walkthrough: regular engagement with the app. Regular engagement includes scrolling through accounts, conducting searches, and bookmarking posts in the app. These forms of close examination of the platform can provide valuable and rich data about the kinds of activity that Instagram enables, limits, and guides users towards (Light et al. 2018:893). By taking an active user position instead of using automated methods for data collection, I noticed the inconsistencies in search results early in the process, especially when it came to sensitive political keywords. To address this recurring problem, I recorded the screen when searching with different keywords over different time periods, revealing different patterns in the search results. In ethnographic studies, photography practices are understood as ways to examine networks, circulations, and meaning-making (Ardévol 2013:80). While conventional photography practices are not applicable in a digital environment, the

use of visual means to make observations and records of social practices, technologies, and performances remains a critical consideration in visual ethnographic studies (Larsen 2008:155). In this case, screenshots and screen recordings were utilised, thereby serving both as the tools and objects of the empirical research.

The inconsistencies of search results can be shown by the following instance. When searching with the hashtag #freehk and the keyword 'freehk' on 24 October 2024, no content was displayed besides the loading icon, even though the search preview indicated there were 88,900 relevant posts. However, when the same search was performed on 31 March 2025, over 88,000 relevant posts were shown. The selective censoring of results from hashtag searches is a known issue among Instagram researchers. As Duguay and colleagues discuss in their empirical study, Instagram allows users to add censored hashtags, but hides the associated content from search results (2018:245). The researchers criticise Instagram's censorship mechanism, particularly its delegation of responsibility for the censorship. As the platform owners claim that content is hidden only when flagged by the community, responsibility for hashtag censorship shifted to the user community (Duguay et al. 2018:245). Furthermore, by censoring all content associated with the same hashtag, Instagram overlooks the diversity of content under a certain hashtag, thereby marginalising and hindering the visibility of specific communities on the platform.

During my walkthrough observations, however, I noticed that the censorship of hashtag searches appears to be temporary in this case. The issue typically arose when multiple searches related to political topics were conducted within a short time frame. I assume that the platform flags frequent searches involving sensitive keywords and thus suspends the search functionality of the account generating these searches (in this case, my own). Once a temporary suspension occurred, searches for other content, such as #restaurants, were also suspended. However, the search function eventually began working again. When I encountered a suspension, I used two strategies to continue the walkthrough.

The first strategy was to revisit the hashtags by repeating the searches multiple times during the data collection period from October 2023 to November 2024. When I encountered bottlenecks in hashtag searches, I paused data collection and engaged in regular Instagram activities before resuming the search process. Regular activities on the app included scrolling through my personal feed, looking at stories of people whom I follow, spending time on the 'Explore' page, and engaging with content in which I am personally interested. Using my personal account was practical in this process, as it allowed for easy switching between 'research activities' to 'regular activities' on the app when necessary. My engagement in regular activities served as a buffer in between searches for politically sensitive content. Although this process prolonged the time needed to gather data from one hashtag, the repeated process yields rich and sufficient data over time. However, it is also important to reflect on the lack of data regarding the duration of these suspensions in my

walkthroughs, as switches between research and regular activities occurred rather irregularly. More insight into this situation could be gained if the exact timestamps for when I conducted a search, got suspended from searching, and regained access to searching with protest-related hashtags were documented.

The second strategy was to shift from hashtag searches to walking through accounts. These accounts are public accounts that appeared in previous hashtag searches, including those of individual artists who publish their own work, as well as accounts dedicated to collecting, distributing, and archiving protest-related content. Data was sampled from these accounts by manually screening the entire profile. While there are individual accounts with thousands of posts of various natures, the number of posts from these accounts typically ranges from tens to hundreds. By closely reviewing these accounts individually, relevant content that is neither associated with hashtags nor distributed by protest publicity groups can be contextualised through both embedded texts and the accounts' previous engagement on the platform. For example, it is possible to determine whether the creator has posted political or protest-related content. Gaining a contextualised understanding of the data, especially visual material without hashtag associations, was critical not only for data analysis but also during the walkthrough. Contextualising images at this stage of data collection was key to minimising the collection of irrelevant data. As Laestadius and Witt suggest, manually sampling posts by looking at individual posts allows researchers to become familiar with the data while simultaneously assessing the relevance of each post during the sampling process (2022:595). Furthermore, account walkthroughs enable observations on changes in the nature of content shared by individual accounts over time. For example, shifts in posting patterns and forms of engagement can be identified in relation to key events such as the suspension of protests due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the enactment of NSL, and anniversaries of such events.

Finally, the last step of the walkthrough entailed the examination of the processes of temporary or permanent disengagement. While this step is underscored by Light and colleagues as a way to explore how apps allow users to disconnect and how they seek to sustain use or retain value from users (2018:895), my focus at this stage of the walkthrough was rather to understand how civic engagement on Instagram evolves over time, or in some cases, arrives at the point of disengagement. Whether an artist's individual account or a protest visuals distribution account created by members of publicity groups during the movements, some accounts remained active by the end of 2024 and continued to generate constant posts, while others gradually distanced their content from political discussion or disengaged from posting completely. As the scholars posit, the walkthrough method may reveal how temporary disengagement leads to new modes of participation, as temporary disconnection does not always end up in a termination of the relationship between the platform and the user (2018:894-5). By taking instances of individual accounts' disengagement into consideration during the walkthrough, insight can be gained into

how disengagement from discussing politics through more explicit visual representations leads to a subtler form of civic engagement on the platform.

In summary, the walkthrough method provides a flexible yet systematic framework by which to investigate visual and textual forms of civic engagement on Instagram. This ethnographic approach with a heavy focus on cultural analysis aligns with my research interests and analytical strengths in contextualising and understanding culturally embedded civic talk in a social, digital, and everyday environment. The walkthrough method enables a first-person experience with Instagram as an app and social media platform, generating insights and data in every step of the process. These insights are not limited to the infrastructure and features of the app; they extend to the power dynamics between the platform and its users, which is particularly crucial in understanding how participants encounter and engage with the images, their practices surrounding the sharing of these materials, and civic culture on Instagram. In this case study, an extensive walkthrough of the platform thus provided valuable insights into how participants navigate accounts and hashtags, interact with others, and overcome challenges to accessing censored content.

Most importantly, a key strength of the walkthrough method is its propensity for revealing unexpected practices. By closely examining individual accounts, subtle shifts in practices and content strategies were discovered. By walking through the platform manually, limitations and algorithm biases of Instagram regarding temporary search suspensions and inconsistencies in search results were also identified and reaffirmed. These problems might not be apparent when automated tools are used for data generation, which could hinder a more contextualised understanding of civic engagement on Instagram.

## Iconography as sampling approach

The step-by-step walkthrough method serves as a framework for launching the data collection process. However, since my empirical interest is in mundane and subtle representations, I adopted iconography as a sampling approach in order to allow the data collection to be conducted in a purposeful manner with a focus on symbols. The relationship between ethnography and iconography has been explored in the study of indigenous art, particularly in terms of how both methods can illumine each other and thereby deepen our understanding of the complexity and subtlety of indigenous thought and its expressions through art (Lewis-Willams 1980:479).

Iconography was modernised by Warburg at the beginning of the 1900s, and in terms of visual interpretation, it was later further refined and popularised by art historian Erwin Panofsky (see Müller 2011:283). As Müller notes, iconography is both a method and an approach to studying the content and meanings of visuals (2011:283). Despite being different terms, the words iconography and iconology are

often used interchangeably. However, Philipps (2011) draws a line between the two when introducing ways to apply visual methods to social movement research. While iconology is an analytical method for the intuitive interpretation of the intrinsic meaning of images (this method will be further elaborated in the 'Analytical methods' section later in this chapter), iconography describes images and give meanings to the objects and elements represented in an image (Philipps 2011:8). For Müller (2014:78), iconography emphasises the subjects and symbols shown in the entire corpus of images in a study in which the themes and content of the images are the primary focus. In contrast, with iconology, the deeper meaning of an image is analysed by contextualising it using cultural, social, and historical information (ibid.). Nevertheless, these two closely related visual methods originated both in the humanities and the social sciences from a Warburgian perspective (see Müller 2011:285). Although iconography was developed and popularised mostly in the fields of art history and visual culture, I believe media studies can benefit from its critical and cultural viewpoints, which can help scholars to understand images with similar motifs and symbols from different temporal contexts. By taking the context of images into account, iconography facilitates a visually driven sampling process without overlooking the importance of textual sources connected to the visual material (Müller 2011:285).

Iconographers are interested in understanding the transfers of image, visual migrations, and the mobility of visuals across time and space (Müller 2011:284). Accordingly, the iconographic approach calls for attention to changing temporal and spatial contexts when looking at images. To emphasise the adaptation and travelling of the symbols I examined, I constructed a dataset of posts composed of collected materials categorised according to the identified symbols and expressions. By taking the original contexts of the posts into account when sampling the data, this iconographic approach allows me to observe how individual symbols travel across time, based on the dates of posting, re-posting, and participant engagement. Categorising the images according to their motifs and symbols also allowed me to construct a systematic way to organise the data and compare the categories in order to reveal the various political and socio-cultural themes and concepts expressed by citizens during this specific temporal context, thereby contributing to the mapping of the visual repertoire of Hong Kong civic culture.

Contextualising the images with other sources of information was key not only during the interpretation process but also during sampling, as it helped to minimise the inclusion of irrelevant data in the sample. For instance, in an empirical study conducted on X, Bouko (2024) eliminates content shared by collectives or group representatives, as the research focus is solely on individual expressions. To achieve this, users were identified either as citizens or as collectives, through a manual analysis of the profiles (Bouko 2025:152). While individual and collective accounts are not strictly differentiated in my study, I noticed that most accounts I came across during sampling are managed by individual users who share political content, but

often post about their everyday lives, as well. Therefore, my concern was to ensure that the sampled images were actual expressions of political opinions. In a similar vein to Bouko's approach, I manually analysed user profiles by reviewing their past content and engagement. Since this research focuses on visual material created by pro-democracy participants, this step is crucial for filtering out content that does not align with pro-democracy forms of engagement. When it comes to images with ambiguous or subtle expressions, it is particularly essential to contextualise them with the user's previous engagement, in order to ascertain whether the image is irrelevant as a political expression. Images that contained one of the symbols that I am investigating, but which did not reflect any relevance to civic engagement, were excluded from the sample.

At the same time, to minimise biases and ensure the quality of the dataset, one must be mindful of the limitations of this approach. Although iconography is seen as a systematic method for working with visual material, questions surrounding the method's validity and subjectivity are often raised (Müller 2011:287). It is therefore important that iconography was not used as the sole method in the sampling process, but rather as a guide within the framework of the ethnographic walkthrough. As some visual researchers argue, visual methods are not meant to be used independently without the support of other methods (Holm 2008:325; Pink 2005:17). By combining two compatible approaches used in visual ethnographic studies, with the walkthrough being the main method and iconography being the sampling guide, two datasets are produced: 1) images with their embedded texts; and 2) user comments.

An inductive and subjective sampling strategy is typically employed in iconographic research, whereas intuition is often highlighted as part of the method (Müller 2011:286). This indicates that researchers who adopt an iconographic approach could use their own particular interest in certain motifs, or representations, to get an overview of similar motifs, as Müller (2011:286) suggests. This thesis's empirical focus lies in the appropriation of seemingly mundane symbols and subtle expressions for the purposes of political discussions on Instagram. Therefore, the sampling strategy is informed by my primary empirical interest in the symbols and visual forms of subtle expression within the Hong Kong civic community on Instagram. In comparison with a random sample, in this case, it is thus more productive to use what Mattoni describes as a purposive sampling technique (2020:285), as the particular research interest is prioritised in the sampling process. Moreover, this theoretically informed sampling approach allows for a quantity of data compatible with thematic analysis, notably when the empirical data are highly characterised by their ephemerality (Doona 2024:71; Kristensen & Mortensen 2021:2450). More details on the sampling process will be discussed in the following section.

## Details of sampling and dataset

During the walkthrough, a series of hashtag and keyword searches were conducted based on a criterion-based sampling strategy (see Punch 2014:162; Nørgaard Kristensen and Mortensen 2021). Nørgaard Kristensen and Mortensen argue that this strategy is appropriate when the approach of collecting data until saturation is unrealistic due to the ephemeral nature of specific genres, particularly memes (2021:2450). Furthermore, since it is not the purpose of this research to create a representative sample, the application of a criterion-based sampling strategy does not preclude the collection of rich data. These are the main criteria I applied during the sampling process:

1. The image should primarily consist of visual elements, with minimal supplementary text.
2. The image should either be a drawing or an illustration; other genres, such as memes and photographs, are excluded.
3. The image should contain visual symbol(s) that are not established political symbols.
4. The image should include an implicit or explicit reference to protest events or current issues in Hong Kong.

The role of hashtags is significant in the emergence and formation of communities, as well as when collating content that shares similar interests about a topic (Bruns & Burgess 2011:2; Highfield & Leaver 2015:6). Therefore, searching for content through the hashtags with which participants are most familiar is the most direct approach that leads to the most relevant content on Instagram. More specifically, I conducted searches using some of the most popular hashtags employed for the dissemination of visual protest materials on Instagram during the previously mentioned social movements in Hong Kong. These hashtags include #standwithHongKong (with 248,000 relevant images shown in search results), #freeHongKong (190,000), #umbrellamovement (61,700), and #antielab (75,000).

With a manual sampling approach, the vast amount of available content associated with these hashtags could be overwhelming. Still, considering that sampling from a large volume of found images on social media means a careful and meaningful selection of data (Hand 2022:20; Kristensen & Mortensen 2021:2450), it was a productive process to scroll through as many images as possible, in order to familiarise myself with the prominent and recurring accounts and symbols that appear in the search results. This process also facilitated the detection of spambot-like behaviour in hashtag uses (McCrow-Young 2021:27). Filtering out irrelevant content manually allowed me to note that, besides bots, these protest-related hashtags are also commonly used by local businesses to promote themselves to pro-democracy citizens. However, this type of content often is of little or no relevance to the protests or social movements; it is merely commercial in nature. In other

words, although these hashtag searches yielded a large volume of content, many posts were rather irrelevant to engagement in civic and political discussions and were thus excluded from the sampling. Besides hashtag searches, walkthroughs of individual accounts were performed to collect data that did not appear in the hashtag searches. Sampling data directly from accounts that are known for having more than one relevant post in the sample made the process of contextualising these images less challenging.

Once a recurring symbol was identified and contextualised, a sampling of images featuring that particular symbol was conducted using a more specific keyword or hashtag search. In other words, by tracking their appearance in different posts on Instagram, I sampled these images by 'following' the symbol across the platform (Merrill & Lindgren 2021:2408). For instance, after conducting hashtag searches with #standwithhongkong and #freehongkong, I came across a few posts featuring white bread as the salient object in the images. By contextualising the white bread symbol with the posting dates and news articles published on those dates, I was able to make sense of the appropriation of the symbol and identify it as a recurring civic symbol on Instagram. The contextualisation of the symbol is then followed by a purposive sampling (Mattoni 2020:285) that aims to collect more empirical material embedding this identified symbol. In the case of the white bread symbol, the hashtag #lifebread is commonly seen in posts featuring the symbol. Therefore, hashtag searches with #lifebread were conducted in both English and Chinese.

In the end, a total of 402 posts were sampled in the form of screenshots, each of which included: 1) the visual content, 2) the embedded texts (i.e., captions, comments, and posting dates). This data collection approach considers both the image and key information in order to maximise contextualisation of the visual objects (Rose 2016; Bouko 2024:151). Only illustrations were sampled, as photographs were not the empirical focus of this study. While a large dataset facilitates the study of broad trends on the platform (Laestadius & Witt 2022:591), a smaller manual sample favours the research of exploring the varied and contextual interactions on the platform in detail. As Kitchin and Lauriault suggest, small data studies reveal individual, nuanced, and contextual stories (2015:466). In terms of the date range, the sampled data already described spans a posting period from June 2019 to June 2024. This indicates that the dataset covers visual materials produced at different times during a five-year period. The temporal range offers insight into the development of civic engagement and expressions, not only throughout the Anti-ELAB Movement, but also before and after the enactment of the NSL.

Regardless of whether a post was sampled through hashtag searches or individual account walkthroughs, it was first saved in a bookmarking folder in the mobile application. Then, the web version was used to retrieve these saved posts from the folder, whereupon screenshots of the posts were made. Using the web version to capture the data in the form of the entire post (including the image, posting date, caption, number of likes, and comments) facilitated the simple collection of data on

a laptop. The datasets were compiled in Microsoft Excel, where a data book was created. The captured screenshots were then transformed into the primary and secondary datasets in preparation for their respective coding—as visual images with their embedded texts or user comments. For the primary dataset, images were viewed as the whole post in its entirety, in order to ensure a contextualised understanding of the data (McCrow-Young 2021:26). In contrast, comments under each post were separated from the rest of the post as a separate dataset, for triangulation with the critical visual analysis. In the data book, 14 categories of symbols were established. One sheet was created for each category, showing the metadata that includes both datasets. Each image has been numbered and is accompanied by its posting date, caption, and hashtags. If the post comes with any user comments, they will be displayed here in the captions.

Importantly, the analysed content consisted solely of material that was publicly accessible on Instagram at the time of collection (Merrill & Lindgren 2021:2409). Unessential data, such as the number of 'likes', was not treated as data or specified in the data book, as the study does not focus on quantitative engagement. However, this information remains visible in the screenshots and could be used to further contextualise user engagement in a separate analysis. Once all the collected material had been organised, the dataset was ready for coding. Before outlining the processes of the thematic content analysis and iconological analysis, it is necessary to reflect on this author's methodological choices in relation to research design and data collection from an ethical perspective. The following section discusses key ethical considerations that have informed this research process.

## Ethical reflections

Prior to the process of data collection, the author of this dissertation engaged thoroughly in ethical considerations regarding risk, privacy, transparency, and data handling. According to the Swedish Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans, social scientific research requires ethical pre-approval if sensitive personal data is involved by any means, or if the research aims to affect the research subjects physically or psychologically (Swedish Ethical Review Authority 2003:460). Sensitive personal data here refers to information that discloses the research subjects' 'racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs' (European Commission 2022). The processing of such data should therefore first be approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.[6]

Data collection started in November 2023 and concluded in November 2024. In accordance with Article 5 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), this research complies with data minimisation, which avoids collecting and processing

[6] This research was approved by the authority on 21 November 2023 (Ref. no. 2023-06573-01).

more personal data than necessary (European Union 2016). It is also worth noting that, in terms of data collection involving personal data, nearly the entire dataset consists of content published by public accounts that do not disclose personally identifiable information in their bios. Whether the dataset constitutes personal data therefore remains ambiguous (McCrow-Young 2021:27).

Undoubtedly, interviewing artists and contributors would provide insightful knowledge for understanding personal and interpersonal everyday life, practices, and experiences in the studied communities. However, rapid political development—including the enactment of the NSL prior to the beginning of the research and the continuous prosecutions of pro-democracy participants—has significantly built up sensitivity around the topic. This also put pressure on research institutions, researchers, and research participants. Specifically, collecting qualitative data on personal opinions and experiences of contentious actions could potentially attract unwanted attention from authorities. In the research field of media and communication, Kubitschko and Kaun posit that the acquisition of knowledge about contemporary social, political, and economic dynamics is closely linked to the application of appropriate methodological approaches (2017:2). Identifying the method that is the most appropriate for collecting empirical data is therefore the first important step when conducting qualitative research. For this dissertation, appropriate research methods should first and foremost be aligned with the research questions. To mitigate risks, it is also important that the research subjects, including the Instagram posts and identities of the users, be protected by anonymity.

For this reason, usernames were removed from the screenshots. The identities of creators, distributors, and commenters will not be disclosed in any part of this thesis. While many images in the dataset already lack identifiable aspects that could be traced to their creators, additional care has been taken with credited images: these images have been cropped from their original, physical dimensions, to ensure that user handles are not visible in the published thesis. Textual data, including captions and comments, is translated and paraphrased in the discussion to create barriers to easy traceability. Finally, it is important to emphasise that the empirical data for this dissertation were collected from public accounts with followers ranging from a few dozen to several tens of thousands. From members of the ‘publicity groups’ (Frederiksen 2022; Wong 2025), to named and anonymous artists who voluntarily relinquished ownership of their works to facilitate the exchange of creative and innovative expressions within the community, participants embraced a resource-sharing system. This culture of sharing and collaboration among artists and other participants during the movements in Hong Kong is described as a demonstration of the ‘open-source ethos’ (Wong 2025:10). While this open-source model, embraced by protest participants and artists, promotes collaboration between actors, it also indicates that these individuals willingly surrender ownership of their works for the collective benefit, according to Wong (2025:24).

With regard to ethical considerations concerning data storage, it is necessary to note that all screenshots are stored on a password-protected laptop, with a research folder located on Lund University's secure local servers. The data is not accessible to anyone other than this researcher and my principal supervisor. Without password authentication and a connection to the university network, either physically or through the Lund University VPN, the data cannot be retrieved. The decision to store the material in a Lund University research folder is based on the high level of security of these folders. It should also be added that USB storage devices were not used due to potential safety risks.

In the following section, I outline the two-step multimethod approach used to qualitatively analyse engagement with civic visuals on Instagram.

# Analytical approaches

For the data analysis, the first step involves a qualitative thematic content analysis of the recurring symbols. This is carried out through a multi-stage process following Riger and Sigurvinsdotter's (2015) analytical strategy, which organises the empirical material and develops themes and descriptive codes, forming a foundation for the visual analysis. The second step consists of a critical visual analysis, which explores the iconological interpretations of individual symbols and expressions. This is guided by Panofsky's (1955) iconological approach—a methodically controlled interpretation that investigates both the symbolic meanings of the individual symbols and also the broader symbolic significance of civic visuals.

Before delving into the details of the thematic and iconological analyses, it is important to first acknowledge and reflect on Rose's (2016) influential framework of critical visual analysis within interdisciplinary social studies. This framework accommodates a diverse range of methods used by researchers working with visual material and it identifies four key sites of critical visual methodologies: the site of production, the site of the image itself, the site of circulation, and the site of the audience. Each site is examined through three modalities: technological, compositional, and social. Table 3 presents an overview of my critical reflection on the visual material, structured according to Rose's framework (2016:24). While this overview generalises a varied and dynamic set of visual material, it offers valuable insights into the broader social effects evident in the collected data. This serves as a crucial foundation for the in-depth analysis of individual images developed later in the analytical chapters.

**Table 3.**
An overview of the visual material, structured according to Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology framework.

| Modalities/ Sites | Site(s) of production | Site of image | Site(s) of circulation | Site(s) of audience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Technological** | Computers, digital illustration software, and programmes | Digital illustration, digitalised images, Instagram posts | Instagram, Instagram algorithms, artists' accounts, smartphones | Instagram users |
| **Compositional** | Protest art, creative illustrations, political graphics, cultural representations, cartoons, propaganda material | Symbols associated with local social and political events (e.g. the apple) | From street arts to digital art, from Hong Kong to overseas, from overseas to Hong Kong | Instagram feed |
| **Social** | Studios or homes of artists, Hong Kong, overseas | Forms of political expressions, engagement with civic culture | Artists & activists' profiles, protest publicity groups, diaspora communities | Decoded and contextualised by members of the civic community—Hong Kong or overseas; irrelevant for users who have no cultural/ political knowledge of the Hong Kong context |

Certainly, this brief overview does not capture the individual qualities of each image. However, it considers the intersections of the images in relation to their technological, compositional, and social modes. Thus, this overview should be treated as a generalised synthesis of the visual data. By analysing and breaking down the known and salient qualities of the material, the table offers a glimpse into the complexities of this dataset. While I can be certain that Instagram is the site of circulation and that the images were circulated from the artists' and distributors' accounts under the influence of Instagram's algorithm, only assumptions can be made about the actual site of production within the social mode. The same ambiguity applies to the site of the audience: Where are these people based in? Are most of them based in Hong Kong?

At the same time, it was impossible at this stage of the research to categorise all images under a single term. Are they protest art, propaganda material, visual art,

political cartoons, or graphic arts? Although these questions could not be answered immediately, this critical review of the overall material highlights the multiple forms of ambiguity embedded within these images. This, in turn, motivated a deeper dive into the ambiguities in both the thematic analysis and iconological analyses.

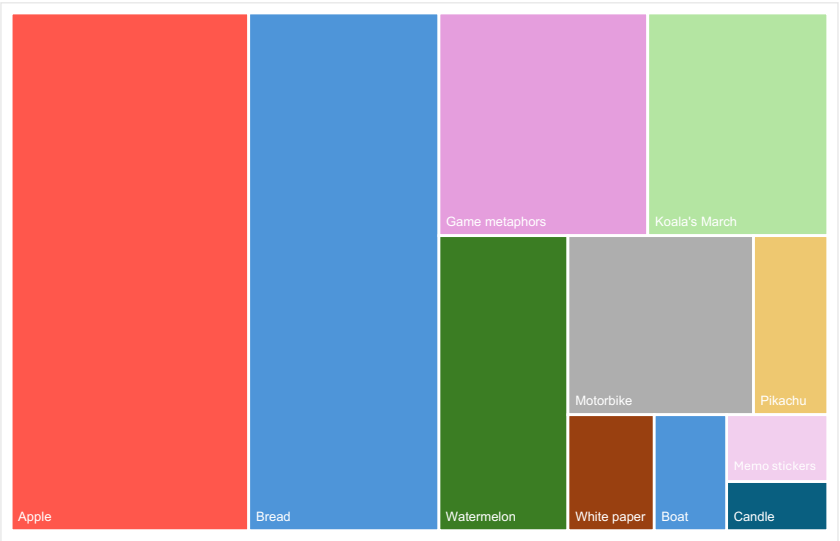
## Step 1: Qualitative thematic content analysis

Pink (2006:322) emphasises that visual methods are never purely visual; often they are used to analyse images by combining visuals with words. Qualitative research seeking to identify and interpret the meaning of images often employs multiple methods. Content analysis is commonly used to identify significant patterns and to reveal symbolic or underlying meanings that can be systematically coded (Hand 2022:10). Following the categorisation of the symbols and visual representations, the next step is to identify the themes that capture and describe the material. To develop themes from both the visual and textual content of the Instagram posts, I started with a thematic analysis of the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that focuses on the interpretive, inductive process of identifying themes in a dataset (Riger & Sigurvinsdotter 2015:33). As an analytical method, thematic analysis offers considerable flexibility (Braun & Clarke 2006:78), making it compatible with other qualitative methods. Although thematic analysis can be used as a stand-alone method to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes represented in the data (Nowell et al. 2017:2), I decided to combine it with content analysis in order to avoid mixing several levels of analysis when working with a multimodal dataset.

The first stage of conducting the thematic content analysis began after the categorisation of symbols was completed. I started by familiarising myself with the collected data and sorting them into categories (Riger & Sigurvinsdotter 2015:34; Nowell et al 2017:4; Nørgaard Kristensen & Mortensen 2021). The visual empirical material was initially sorted into 13 categories (see Table 4): watermelon; apple; white bread; Koala's March-branded cookies; motorbike; games symbols; Pikachu; white paper; memo stickers; candle; boat; others. A quantitative-driven incentive was applied when eliminating insignificant categories or categorising them as 'others', as they are not recurring and hence less prominent in the dataset, making it more challenging to compare and discuss their patterns and significance, as well as examining the meaning-making process around these symbols critically and analytically. I organised the posts under each category by numbering them and marking the dates of posting, along with their written captions, comments, and associated hashtags. As I organised the data, I noted thoughts and observations related to the individual posts. Of all the categories (see Table 4), the most prominent ones included the apple symbol (74 images), the bread symbol (59 images), and game metaphors (28 images). Less prominent categories include the

watermelon symbol (23 images), the Koala's March symbol (24 images), and the motorbike symbol (20 images).

**Table 4.**
Categorisation of recurring symbols in collected data.




The second stage of the analysis involved manually creating initial and descriptive codes for the posts featuring the most prominent symbols and expressions: the apple, the bread, and game metaphors. Inductive codes are created from both the visual content and embedded texts. This inductive approach allowed for the organisation of the data into 'meaningful units' before constructing themes (Riger & Sigurvinsdotter 2015:34). At this stage, my goal was not to interpret the underlying meanings of the visual materials yet; the critical visual analysis at a later stage will focus more on revealing the intrinsic meanings of the visual through visual iconology analysis. Therefore, I focused on creating descriptive codes to explore as many potential themes as possible.

These descriptive codes were constructed through a simple semiotic analysis of the visual elements that involved describing the visual data according to colours, objects, icons, lighting, composition, and angles. Similarly, for the textual data, I performed inductive coding with descriptive codes to guide the analysis. These texts, which can be seen as descriptions of the visual content, also need to be described and investigated for their productivity (Highmore 2018:250). To address the multiple levels and modes of this dataset, I distinguished the codes for the visual content from those of the textual data. This allowed me to identify how participants

expressed their opinions differently in visual and written forms and explore themes and categories unique to each dataset.

The third stage of the analysis focused on searching for themes. This involved reviewing codes and material grouped by the same codes. By organising descriptive codes according to their topics of discussion, emotional expressions, aesthetic styles, and featured symbols, subthemes were created to identify commonalities and differences between the codes. This process developed a list of potential themes that captured a variety of codes and subthemes, further guiding the analysis.

The final stage of the thematic analysis involved reviewing the potential themes. Compared to the previous stages, this step was more theoretically driven. Dahlgren's (2003; 2009) civic culture framework was used as a conceptual and analytical guidance to refine the themes. This included evaluating existing themes to determine whether they substantially addressed different dimensions within civic culture and were relevant to the research questions. Nørgaard Kristensen and Mortensen (2021:2450) suggest that while searching for themes across identified topics and codes, it is necessary to go back and forth between initial observations and defining themes. After rounds of review and evaluation, irrelevant themes were eliminated, and the remaining themes were refined and finalised to represent the entire dataset.

## Step 2: Iconological analysis

While there is an increasing trend of studying visual protest material in social sciences studies, Philipps criticises that the majority of these studies focus on merely describing the protest images or logos as illustrations or documents (2012:3-4). Fewer studies, as he argues, apply theoretically embedded visual methods to explore the logos' symbolic meaning. Bouko identifies a common problem in qualitative research of visual expressions; she criticises many studies that claim to be qualitative, but often present quantitative results (2024:153). It is not my aim to quantify the findings or significance of the symbols for civic engagement in Hong Kong, but rather to present analytical interpretations of the civic visuals. Therefore, it is crucial for me to discuss the underlying meaning of the symbols and the visual expressions through a critical visual analysis.

As described earlier, iconology is both a method and an approach that goes beyond iconography—a more descriptive analysis of images—to study the content and meanings of visuals (Müller 2011:283). More specifically, it involves intuitive interpretation of intrinsic meaning based on the 'formal arrangements and technical procedures' in images (Panofsky 1955:38). By acknowledging the technical procedures of the images—i.e. how images are produced—over a specific time period, Panofsky argues that an iconological analysis can reveal the political ideas,

intentions and dispositions of artists, through an 'inductive, subjective, critical, analytic, and transdisciplinary' method (Müller 2011:285), thereby producing a highly contextualised interpretation of a series of images. As Müller puts it, at its core, iconology is a forensic method (2011:286). In visual culture studies, the key issue is to understand how meaning is established (Hand 2022), and it is most important to acknowledge that an image cannot be interpreted independently of its contexts (Doerr & Milman 2014:426). For these reasons, I adopted an iconological approach to interpreting the underlying meanings of seemingly apolitical and mundane symbols appropriated by Hong Kong citizens for their (assumed) political discussions on social media.

To reveal the underlying meaning of an image requires an intensive study of the symbolic values. Different from other visual methods like semiology, in which the active self is absent, iconology indicates the participatory role of the self in acquiring meaning from external phenomena, and it is essential for one to keep in mind that the meanings are being understood by a self (Shin 1990:18-19). To critically analyse the visual material in my dataset, I followed Panofsky's (1955) three-step iconological method. Developed from Warburg's concept of iconography, this method suggests three different layers of meaning of an image.

At the primary level, or the pre-iconographic description stage, visual details are described as neutrally as possible (Müller 2011:290). This level does not require any contextual knowledge, allowing interpretations based on everyday experiences. However, this means that only the very basic subject matter of the image can be identified. The second level, known as iconographical analysis, involves applying one's existing literary, artistic, and cultural knowledge (Howells & Negreiros 2019). Contextual information is essential for creating interpretations that go beyond basic subject matter. This enables a contextualised interpretation (Doerr & Milman 2014:435) and places the images within broader cultural contexts, such as the cultural practices in Hong Kong. Finally, at the highest level of iconological analysis, the underlying meaning of the image is explored. This level uncovers the fundamental attitudes of a country, period, class, religion, or philosophy. To reveal the intrinsic meaning of an image that lies hidden under the depictions of certain icons or attributes, the audience must combine their cultural or historical knowledge with analysis to identify the disguised symbolism in the image. 'Disguised symbolism' refers to everyday objects that live 'double lives', imbued with both realistic and symbolic significance. Despite the differentiation of the analytical steps, an iconological interpretation should be understood as an integrated process that allows for an encompassing interpretation of the meanings of the analysed visuals.

In summary, this chapter has sought to clarify the methodological foundations of the study by discussing methods and criticisms of existing qualitative visual research in the social sciences and by providing justifications for the methodological choices made in this author's research. While strategic decisions were made to

facilitate the analysis of empirical material of this kind and scale, it is clear that certain limitations remain in the design of this study. These limitations, however, did not hinder the collection of an empirically rich dataset. In the following chapters, I develop the analysis of the material and present selected images from the dataset. By showing the images alongside the discussion of the findings, I invite readers of this thesis to view these works for themselves as I offer my interpretations of their meanings and argue for their significances from a theoretical standpoint.

# 6. Civic Talk on Media Censorship: The Silenced Apple

## Introduction

This first empirical chapter is dedicated to examining civic talk on Instagram surrounding the topics of media censorship and press freedom in Hong Kong since 2020. Talk among citizens is a fundamental expression of their participation in society (Dahlgren 2002:6). However, such talk differs depending on where, when and how it occurs, and between whom. It is pivotal to draw a line between civic talk and formal political discussions among citizens, as the former takes place to a larger extent in the private sphere among social networks of peers while the latter typically occurs in the public sphere (Klofstad 2011:11-16), even though it is not possible to draw a firm line between the two. The material collected in this study and the vast amount of visual protest material shared by individual citizens, protest communities, and other civic groups on Instagram show that when citizens feel restricted from participating in political discussions in public settings, they continue to navigate spaces for informal discussions on politics and current events online.

Civic talk is typically defined as unintentional and more of a byproduct of everyday discussions (Klofstad 2011:12-16). That is, people do not usually seek out particular individuals when they engage in civic talk. However, it often occurs among like-minded peers. In search of the answer to how politics and current issues are discussed in an increasingly repressive environment, I find that while people do intend to spark small conversations about problematic developments in current events when they post an image on Instagram, they rarely purposefully seek interactions with neither people from outgroups nor the authorities. Rather, these posts can predominantly be seen as expressions by citizens in reaction to political issues, triggered by various emotions. However, this does not mean that this kind of talk is irrelevant to civic participation. As the findings in this chapter show, civic talk by means of civic visuals influences others in the community to get involved. By shaping collective opinions and memories, civic talk might have an impact on policy in the long run (Dahlgren 2002:10). In a nutshell, I argue that the importance of civic talk in understanding civic engagement should not be underestimated, even when it takes the form of aesthetic visuals rather than oral or written expressions. On top of being informal, unplanned, and interwoven with the fabric of everyday

discussions (Wyatt, Katz & Kim 2000; Dahlgren 2002:17), I suggest that civic visuals should be taken seriously as an evolving form of civic talk, with attention paid to its aesthetics and cultural codes.

This chapter begins with a descriptive assessment of the apple symbol, the most prominent symbol in the dataset used by pro-democracy citizens when talking about the suppression of journalists and the eventual shutdown of the biggest opposition newspaper in Hong Kong, *Apple Daily*. My analysis of the images featuring the apple symbol is presented in three parts, in order to illustrate how it withstands the test of time and evolves according to the development in the political and media landscape in Hong Kong over the years, as opposed to other symbols discussed in this dissertation that tend to be more ephemeral. When looking at civic visuals produced in different periods, it becomes apparent that both the styles and emotions communicated by these images subtly change over time. Within affective communities, these emotions are often shared and acknowledged by peers, further strengthening relationships between members and their civic identities in various ways. The chapter concludes by underlining the growing trend of ambiguous expressions in civic visuals. As they become more subtle, only informed citizens within the community can interpret the discussion to its fullest. On one hand, this ambiguity sustains civic talk when citizens must navigate risks and opportunities in various spaces. On the other hand, it creates a high threshold that hinders the development of potential interest from individuals who are unable to interpret the symbolic meanings of the civic visuals without sufficient cultural knowledge.

The following analysis is presented according to the thematic categories identified in the visual analysis: 1) (non-)disruptive style of expression; 2) symbol appropriation as empowerment; 3) affective communities; 4) remembrance. These themes were developed from images published on Instagram during three different periods of time: the first raid on the *Apple Daily* newsroom, the shutdown of the newspaper (i.e. the second raid and closure of its online platforms and publications), and the period following the shutdown.

# The forbidden fruit

Among all symbols discussed in this dissertation, the apple is perhaps one of the most recognisable to Hong Kong citizens. It appropriates the logo of the city's biggest pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily*. Since the newspaper's establishment in 1995, its emblem—a bitten red apple with a green stem and two green leaves—has become a ubiquitous visual marker at newsstands, convenience stores, and supermarkets throughout the city. The symbol gained renewed prominence in civic talk and political discussions on press freedom following the Anti-ELAB Movement, when journalists began openly addressing the deterioration

of media freedom in Hong Kong's journalism industry and the growing threats faced by journalists. At the 52nd gala dinner of the Hong Kong Journalist Association's (HKJA) held on 28 December 2021, the chairperson of the association expressed journalists' concerns over the shrinking room for freedom of the press, worsening of self-censorship, and the declining of credibility rating of the media by the public, as a result of the implementation of the NSL (HKJA 2020). These concerns were proven to be no exaggerations. As mentioned in Chapter 2, two local news media outlets, *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, were forced to shut down within a year.

Four pivotal moments mark the protracted shutdown of the *Apple Daily* (see Figure 4). Along with these developments were active discussions among citizens on the internet who adopted the symbol in a wide range of civic visuals. As the events unfolded, the meaning of the apple symbol evolved accordingly. To illustrate the evolution of the symbolic meaning attached to this symbol, I will discuss my analysis of the apple symbol in a chronological manner.

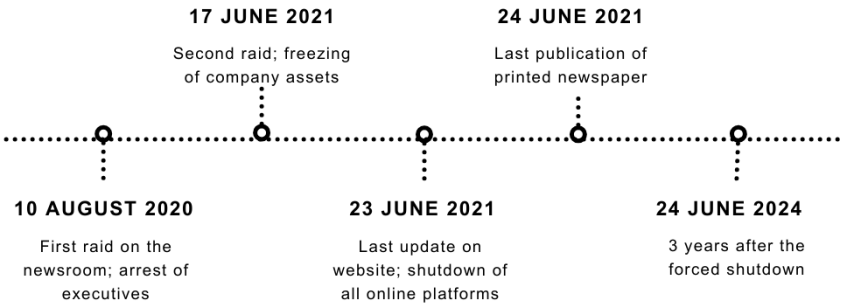



**Figure 4**
Timeline of the shutdown of *Apple Daily* created by the author.

## Part I: First raid on the newsroom

Ten months before the newspaper was forced to cease operations, the owner of the company, Jimmy Lai, and other executives at Next Media (the mother company of *Apple Daily*) were arrested by the Hong Kong Police Force during the initial raid of the newsroom on 10 August 2020. This event sparked the first wave of civic visuals featuring the apple symbol.

As the only printed newspaper outlet that positioned itself as pro-democratic, *Apple Daily* had shown its significance in representing opposition voices in society, particularly those confronting the Government and its policies (Lee 2019:102). From its establishment in 1995 to the cessation of operations in 2021, *Apple Daily*

remained controversial, due not only to its political stance, but also its style of reporting. Its racy tabloid style of reporting, which combined sensationalism with serious journalism (Vines 2021a), was the first among local media. While a lot of readers enjoyed this refreshing take on news reporting, the media outlet's paparazzi were notoriously controversial in the ways they dug up stories on celebrities and public figures (Cheung 2007 :81; Leung 2006). Nonetheless, *Apple Daily* was an influential, provocative, and independent news source in Hong Kong. Its strong pro-democracy stance and fearlessness in criticising Chinese and Hong Kong politics and officials set it apart from other large-scale news outlets in the Hong Kong media landscape. The media outlet also emphasised interactivity with citizens on its online platforms, encouraging readers to contribute by sending in first-hand material and participatory narratives. Having established itself as a media organisation that gives voices to the public by inviting them to participate, *Apple Daily* blurred the boundaries between traditional professional journalism and citizen-assisted journalism. As such, the balance in its news reporting between rationality and emotionality was not entirely equal.

The visual material disseminated after the first raid of the newsroom can be categorised under two contrasting styles: the outspoken, disruptive style and the subtle, non-disruptive style. The key distinction between them is that the former presents direct, violent portrayals of repression, while the latter uses a non-aggressive narrative to highlight the importance of solidarity with the newspaper. However, as the analysis shows, both styles are ambiguous to different extents.

In design research, disruptive aesthetics is a notion within the interdisciplinary field of design activism, a research field interested in understanding how design plays a central role in promoting social change and how it influences people's everyday life (Markussen 2013:38-39). The notion of disruptive aesthetics embraces the political potential of aesthetics to disrupt existing power system and authority, as well as the aesthetic potential in opening up relationships between people's behaviours and emotions. While it is not my intention to dive into the field of design research, this notion and definition of disruptive aesthetics very much align with the style adopted by the studied Hong Kong communities in their creating civic visuals. In the following examples, disruptions in the ordinary are vividly portrayed. These disruptions include acts of threatening and silencing, as well as breaking through boundaries (see Figure 5).

Generally, the illustrations that adopted a disruptive style conveyed a more direct message, as opposed to the non-disruptive style, which will be discussed shortly. Here in Figure 5, the apple can be interpreted as under severe threat in the different scenarios. However, without contextualising these images with information and knowledge regarding the newsroom raid, this message means next to nothing. Despite its directness, there remains ambiguities in these images, as none of the images deliberately illustrate their contexts.


**Figure 5**
A collage of illustrations featuring the apple following the first raid of the newsroom. Source: Instagram.

While informed citizens are likely to interpret that these images as responses to the raid incident, those who have little information with which to contextualise these images might not at all draw any connections at all between them and a newspaper company, as none of them include a depiction of a newspaper. Another important detail that was largely left out in the illustrations was the presence of the authorities. The newsroom raid was broadcast live on *Apple Daily*'s online platform as it was unfolding. The live stream showed a big group of uniformed and plain-clothes police officers going through documents in the newsroom and eventually confiscating boxes of them. Yet, in these representations, the authorities are either absent or only subtly represented by a police cordon.

Instead of focusing on the authorities, these images indirectly highlight their control over the media and the people. By silencing, chaining, barricading, and tying up the apple, the power of the authorities is emphasised even in their absence. This conveys a significantly imbalanced power dynamic between the apple and the authorities. An iconological interpretation might suggest that: although powerful authorities are not always visible here, they remain in control. From the perspective of Dewey's aesthetics, everyday tensions and disruptions in the everyday present a problem that awaits solving. When presented with a scenario that lacks harmony, a desire for restoration can transform a viewer's raw emotion into interests in things around them, as a way to find the solution to this 'problem' (Dewey 1934:15). Once harmony is restored, what is learned through thinking becomes part of how we understand those things, bringing meaning to the objects with which we were presented in the first place. As Dewey posits, artists embrace tension and deliberately work with it (ibid). It is the emotion that unifies the experience, making it richer and total. From a Deweyan perspective, tension thus plays an important part in creating an aesthetic experience.


**Figure 6**
A second collage of illustrations featuring the apple following the first raid of the newsroom. Source: Instagram.

A second style observed in these images is that of non-disruptive, subdued aesthetics (see Figure 6). This style reflects the characteristics of a popular culture subgenre in East Asia known as *slice of life*, which focuses on presenting the mundane experiences rather than action (Chen 2020:320). Characterised by its absence of grand narratives, dramas, and conflicts, 'slice of life' depicts moments in everyday life (Yu 2021). Similarly, civic visuals portrayed in a non-disruptive style generally take more time to tell their the story. These images are often set in an calm, peaceful atmosphere with no sign of disruptions or threats, and seem to depict an uneventful moment or object in everyday life. Unlike the disruptive style, which conveys discomfort and distress, this alternative style, in which the apple is presented as an integral part of everyday life, may evoke a sense of comfort and familiarity.

However, what these two aesthetic styles have in common is that neither of them overtly relates to or addresses their topic in explicit terms. Beneath the surface of a slice of life artwork, deeper underlying symbolic meanings can be interpreted in conjunction with contextual knowledge and embedded texts included in the social media post. For instance, the date of posting contextualises the temporality of the images, while the captions express supporting messages. The hashtags that were widely used to disseminate content of such on the platform verify the relevance of the images, such as #appledaily, #weneedappledaily, #supportappledaily, and #pressfreedom. However, no detailed information about the raid is mentioned in these posts.

When contextual texts like hashtags and captions are lacking, this may lead the audience to focus more on the symbols and visual narratives. Illustrations appear to depict the apple in intimate, familiar everyday settings, drawing attention to the potential precarity that would arise if the apple were to disappear. This author posits that these subdued portrayals of the *Apple Daily* incident underscore the importance of continuity over disruption in civic cultures. The everyday gains value when it is disrupted by profound and abrupt changes, making what was once taken for granted 'precarious and precious, fragile and sustaining', as Highmore argues (2022:59).

Underneath the mundane surface of the everyday is a social ecology of unstable feelings where passions develop. Passion is key to the making of self-identity, which eventually transforms into focus and becomes opaque (Highmore 2011:36-7). The potential shutdown of *Apple Daily* (and other independent media) could strip citizens of valued aspects in their day-to-day lives. In this sense, the non-disruptive style approach masks threats to democracy with depictions of mundane activities, like eating or holding an apple, could be interpreted as a way to encourage informed citizens to reflect on these repressive developments and their own desire and passion for sustaining democracy by supporting the free press in different shapes or forms.

## Symbol appropriation as empowerment

As noted in Chapter 4, knowledge and practices are two of the most empowering dimensions in civic cultures. This is because citizens can most easily examine their knowledge and practices in a self-reflexive manner, mapping the growth of their own civic participation (Dahlgren 2009:123). Upon analysing this set of data, one notes that they evoke sense of empowerment in terms of the way they call for support and collective action. In the case of the apple symbol, the images are largely mobilised to express support for *Apple Daily*, which can be seen as a symbolic defender of democracy; following the raid, the media company's logo was quickly adopted as a significant symbol of the free press among these images, signifying the defence of press freedom by media practitioners and citizens. This observation aligns with Haq and colleagues' findings in a 2022 study, in which Instagram users in Hong Kong have prominently employed symbols such as the umbrella, during protests as a way to show solidarity with the protesters (2022:3735). As an appropriated symbol, the apple carries multiple layers of meaning. Not only does it represents the embattled media company, it also stands for the free press as a whole, by positioning *Apple Daily*'s role as a leader in media organisations' efforts to resist media censorship. The apple thus becomes a sign for democracy in a broader sense. One could argue that the appropriation of the apple symbol empowers the media, as the apple is given a new, strong new symbolic meaning in the context of the defence of democracy. The empowerment effect can also be observed directly in the high demand for the printed newspaper following the raid. In reaction to the overwhelming support from readers, *Apple Daily* printed 550,000 copies of the newspaper the following day, significantly more than their usual 70,000 copies. The newspaper quickly sold out at multiple locations, with readers and activists showing their support by sharing pictures of their copies on social media.

While appropriating its logo is one way to empower *Apple Daily*, the collective adaptation of the logo reflects the resilience and connections shared by individuals in this civic culture. Through these practices of raising awareness of the issue on Instagram and using the apple symbol to express concerns and emotions prompted by the incident, people affirm for each other that they are not alone. This potentially

empowers community members to talk about the issue and show more acts of support.

For example, in the visuals, the act of support is depicted through portrayals of holding and shielding the apple from the rain in the visuals. In captions and comments, people expressed solidarity using emojis and phrases like 'support Apple' (撐蘋果) and 'hold on' (頂住). These phrases can be interpreted not only as expressions of solidarity, but also as calls for collective action. Despite limitations, people could also show tangible support for the newspaper in various forms, such as by purchasing the newspaper, staying informed about the developments, and sharing information within their networks. Recognising that art has the potential to convert emotions into interest (Dewey 1934:15), I argue that the artists and creators responsible for the images presented in Figure 5 and 6 intentionally underscored a growing problem using an explicit or subtle aesthetic style, prompting people to think critically about the issue and explore ways to counter it. By making sense of the images and the problems they present, viewers could engage in efforts to restore harmony in society, rendering this interaction with the artwork meaningful from an aesthetic perspective.

Here, it is worth returning to Dahlgren. Civic cultures, as a theoretical concept, is interested in seeking answers to what enables or prevents people from acting as political agents and participating themselves (Dahlgren 2013:24). In this case, the creation, publication, 'liking' and sharing of these seemingly apolitical images can be considered as practices that further encourage and facilitate participation in the defence of free press in Hong Kong. Presumably, citizens engaged in these practices because they found meaning in supporting a pro-democracy media organisation and in being active participants in a community fighting for important democratic values. Thus, they saw themselves as participants in this pro-democracy community, and found their engagement meaningful. This is crucial to gaining a sense of civic agency, which, in turn, is a foundation of participation (Dahlgren 2009:102).

## Part II: The shutdown

For readers, journalists, citizens and foreign governments alike, the forced shutdown of *Apple Daily* was an unsettling development for democracy in Hong Kong. The Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom released a statement on the closure of the newspaper, commenting that it was a 'chilling blow to freedom of expression in Hong Kong' (GOV.UK 2021). That same day, the Spokesperson of the European Union also released a statement, stating that the NSL was being used by Beijing to 'stifle freedom of the press and the free expression of opinions' (European Union 2021). President Joseph R. Biden of the United States also released a statement, starting by saying that it was 'a sad day for media freedom in Hong Kong and around the world', calling out on Beijing for targeting the independent press, and calling

for the release of detained journalists and media executives that have detained (WH.GOV 2021). Although upsetting for many concerned and pro-democracy citizens, this development was not entirely unpremeditated, as it reflected a continuation of earlier events.

When the authorities conducted a second raid on the newsroom on June 17, 2021, the incident triggered another surge in the creation of images featuring the apple symbol. Shortly after, on 24 June 2021, *Apple Daily* announced its decision to shut down the newspaper in order to protect its staff members. They ceased operations on all online platforms the same day and published their final printed edition the following day. This rapid series of events triggered a surge in Instagram content production, with the images created during this period making up the largest share of the dataset featuring the apple symbol.

These images evoke strong emotions regarding the shutdown, while also expressing gratitude for the newspaper's societal contributions to democracy over the years. The apple symbol's meaning has seemingly shifted away from representing the free press (as it had in earlier phases of the creation of apple-themed images) to symbolising democracy's 'last straw'. Beyond the actual shuttering of the news outlet, the symbolic downfall of the apple suggests a gradual, orchestrated suppression of press freedom and freedom of expression and the implementation of stricter censorship, and hints at more information control in the foreseeable future.

To avoid confusion and acknowledge the nuances of emotional experience, I do not categorise emotional engagement as merely positive or negative, because even when a positive emotion is present in a visual expression, it can still be mixed with negative emotions. I therefore borrow the concept of *emotional temperature* (Barbosa Escobar et al. 2021) to describe the emotions embedded in these affective expressions, suggesting that emotions can be described as either 'warm' or 'cool'. Both positive and negative emotions are identified in the thematic analysis of the apple symbol. Whether positive or negative (e.g. expressing anger or gratitude), they can be described as 'warm emotions', insofar as they often strive to stimulate physiological bodily reactions, or so I interpret them (Barbosa Escobar et al. 2021:2). Warm emotions indicate stronger and more intense emotional attachment than cool ones such as indifference, apathy, calmness, and detachment. The overwhelmingly warm emotions embedded in the visual data indicate strong feelings and intense emotional attachment elicited when Instagram users expressed their emotions regarding the shutdown of *Apple Daily*. The following section delve into the interpretation of the different kinds of emotions communicated by the Instagram platform users, as shown in the data.

## Civic visuals as affective engagement

As mediated events were broadcasted and widely reported by every local media outlet, the raid and the eventual shutdown of *Apple Daily* immediately triggered a range of warm emotions among the Instagram users as they watched events unfold. With the exception of the social media pages of pro-establishment media and organisations, online platforms were filled with comments that expressed anger, fury, and disappointment over the authorities' moves against the news outlet.

Figure 7 presents three examples of images featuring the apple symbol that were shared on Instagram immediately following the announcement of Apple Daily's closure. They share a common theme of grieving the downfall of the apple. In brief, one image depicts what seems to be a funeral for 'freedom' on 1 July 2021. The annual July 1st March in Hong Kong is held on the anniversary of the city's handover to China. Pro-democracy activists started the tradition of holding peaceful demonstrations that day, with different groups joining the march every year. When the NSL was first proposed in 2003, 500,000 people joined the July 1st March to protest the enactment of the law. Two images portray the apple in black and white, signifying the death of the apple. Connected by their expression of negative emotions, these images illustrate how the public engages with political events on social media in a negative affective mode.

Drawing on the concept of the affective public, emotions and feelings shape the ways in which strangers connect and form attachments, building a sense of belonging (Papacharissi 2015:117). Creating and sharing images that embed strong emotions can be seen as practices of making affective statements that have the potential to invite emotions that connect the viewers to the people who make the statements. In the form of visuals, these expressions allow their creators to spark affective reactions from their Instagram followers and potentially form an emotional bond with them.

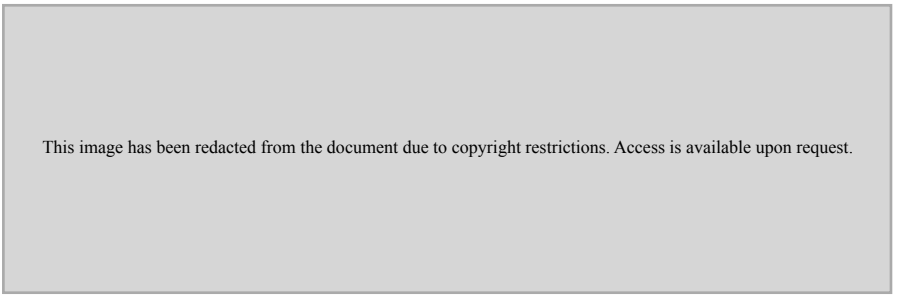



**Figure 7**
Collage of images featuring the apple symbol after the shutdown (sadness). Source: Instagram.


**Figure 8**
An illustration featuring the apple with an expiry date. Source: Instagram.

Figure 8 shows an illustration published on the date of *Apple Daily*'s closure. The salient subject in this image, the red apple logo, is positioned along with two white and green labels, each displaying what appear to be dates and times. Specifically, the white label at the bottom reads 'Exp. Date', '25 Jun' and '23:59:59', while the green label above it shows 'EXP. 24.06.21'. Common knowledge tells us that 'exp.' stands for expiration, a term typically found on food products to indicate their typical last date of consumption. The juxtaposition of these two labels suggests that the label has been abruptly replaced by a new one, implying a sense of sudden, immediate change.

Here, to explore the symbolic meaning of this image based on its visual and contextual clues, it is necessary to consider the events that occurred between 24 and 25 June. On 23 June 2021, the board of directors of *Apple Daily* announced that the printed newspaper would cease publication by midnight on 25 June. However, later the same day, they issued a second announcement stating that the final printed edition would be published on 24 June instead. The metaphorical comparison between the company's shutdown and the apple's expiration date can be understood as an affective expression, the purpose of which is to evoke emotional reactions. Describing something as 'expired' connotes that it has reached to the end of its life and is no longer valuable. While this can be seen as a direct way of addressing the newspaper's closure, describing it as expired potentially provokes stronger emotions and participation, encouraging viewers to grieve and reflect on the values *Apple Daily* represents. More importantly, the end of *Apple Daily*'s life does not only mark the end of the media company; it also signifies that democratic values like liberty, pluralism, and freedom of expression are now considered 'expired' and 'outdated' by the authorities. Despite its very simple design and composition, there is a sense of powerlessness embedded in this image that communicates an event that will have immediate effect on society, as I interpret. In response to the image, affective statements flooded into the comment section, bringing in the collective side of emotionality (Papacharissi 2015; Dahlgren & Hill 2023:75).

‘Not expired. Was murdered on 24/6’, one commentator wrote; another said, ‘RIP’; a few expressed their emotions using the sadness and broken heart emojis. There were also more lengthy exchanges between users. One wrote, ‘I stand with Hongkong in these dark days’; another replied, ‘We will stand together till the light shine through darkness once again’, ‘glory to Hong Kong, love from the Netherlands’, ‘proclaimed as expired and forcibly removed’.[7] Another user discussed how unfortunate it was that the media company was not able to transfer assets to another country to continue operations, sparking replies from others. The following excerpt shows the exchange of comments between two users under this post.

[User A] It’s sad the company wasn’t able to sell […] to another owner, [or move] to a different country.

[User B] It’s not a hostile takeover or a M&A [mergers and acquisition], this is a tyrannic government shutting down the press…

[User A] Yes; but if the current management & owners sold the news company, the management will be out of trouble

[User B] Then they will just arrest the new management again isn’t it? It’s not about the assets, or name, or entity; it[‘s] about [the authorities want to destroy] any size or form of institutions that make them look bad

[User A] New management won’t be based in CCP territory

[User B] Then what about the reporters?

[User A] Reporters have several choices: stop reporting politics, report [on lifestyle] or sports or business, move to another country, write books, write copy ads […]. I’m not being dismissive of people’s hardship; but [having] gone through some minor challenges in my life [compared to Hong Kong], I came up with [a] coping strategy.

[User B] I understand your point; surviving is better than being dead. The point is, Apple Daily as an entity is not allowed to exist, because China deals in an absolute friend or foe mentality, and Apple Daily is a foe. [So,] changing ownership, having foreign owners, doesn’t stop them from uprooting the newspaper, they’ll just go after someone in another way.

Two different perspectives are displayed in this conversation, exhibiting both agreement and disagreement in different parts of the discussion. While both writers show gloomy feelings upon the abrupt shutdown, they hold different opinions on the news company’s reactions to the crisis. One perspective suggests that relocating the company to another country and avoiding political reporting would be the best strategy. This approach would reduce the likelihood of the owners and staff being targeted by the authorities, allowing them to preserve their company and jobs. The

[7] Comment translated from Chinese to English by the author.

opposing view counters this idea, emphasising that the government's goal is to silence dissenting voices. It argues that self-censorship and information control are precisely what the Government aims to achieve, and that the core issue is not about ownership, but the existence of an independent and critical press in society.

Affective expressions as such can be shaped by local participants' collective aspirations, which, in turn, offer inspirations for other groups or communities on some occasions (Papacharissi 2015:118). In the above comment exchange, although both users share concerns over the Chinese Government's increasing control over the Hong Kong press, their perspectives diverse significantly in terms of their political and societal ideals and values. Here, it is interesting to break down the contexts of locality in these comments. For instance, User A mentions having faced minor challenges compared to that of Hong Kong, implying that they are less likely to be a local citizen. In this way, their views on this issue could be shaped by similar experiences in a different context. This individual advocates for complying with the regime and accepting press control to maintain job security, contrasting with the local civic groups' long-standing efforts to defend press freedom and the media' role in monitoring and exposing the authorities' abuse of power (Lee and Chan 2018:99). This perspective may be stemming from the user's negative experiences in a different context. As one of their comments warns, 'some days, all you [get to choose is the] "less worse of all bad choices".' This suggests a belief that there is no total escape from suppression, and individuals must find ways to minimise its impact on themselves and their families.

While disagreeing with the User A, User B respectfully engages with their comments. They address the roots of the problem, identified as the authorities' intent to suppress any forms of dissent in the media. They argue that defending the free press is far more important than merely protecting job security for society as a whole. This perspective resonates with the general reactions of Hong Kong citizens regarding this event. It suggests that the authorities will continue to suppress the press and dissenting voices, even if *Apple Daily* avoids reporting on sensitive political issues. Hence, transferring ownership or relocating the company would have little impact on sustaining the company or defending the free press in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the user expresses understanding towards the other person's idea about providing a sense of security by preserving a sustainable work environment for the reporters through such measures.

What both users' comment have in common is sentimentality that reflects the users' personal experiences and the core values that they wish to uphold. As a platform, Instagram facilitates a meaningful discussion on balancing individual and democratic values. The affective expression in form of visuals sparks reflections among viewers, encouraging engagement by 'liking' the post or writing comments. The sentimental responses from different viewers further provoke reactions from others. On top of that, the viewers' respect for different individuals and their voices enables the public to exchange thoughts and opinions on important social issues,

fostering a meaningful interaction between individual users in response to this Instagram post. Political knowledge is discursive, contingent on circumstances, and changeable in the context of the Internet (Chadwick 2006:87). By commenting on each other's posts on Instagram, individuals can gain new political perspectives and knowledge directly from one another, as political knowledge emerges through interactions as such (Dahlgren 2009:109). However, if access to a particular source of political information is disrupted, civic agency to acquire relevant knowledge is challenged. The loss of access to knowledge directly impacts the public's practices and skills, as civic cultures are partially shaped by the appropriation of information in various ways (ibid.).

Civic agency entails engaging in the public sphere, making sense of media representations of important issues, and discussing current events with others (Dahlgren 2009:76). Civic agency and knowledge are interdependent; without knowledge, civic agency cannot be fully practiced; and without civic agency, new knowledge cannot be generated. Dahlgren asserts that an individual without knowledge cannot act successfully as a citizen (2009:76). Knowledge is required for participation and it plays a key role in informing citizens and in the formation of opinion. Following this line of thinking, the shutdown of the largest pro-democratic newspaper in Hong Kong deprived the public of a significant media outlet for information and knowledge on current local and international affairs from a pro-democratic perspective. With nearly all Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong having previously demonstrated a pro-establishment stance, the closure of *Apple Daily* constituted the loss of access to media representations of issues from a critical standpoint.

Figure 9 presents a collage of illustrations that express the warm emotions of both anger and fear. The portrayals of the shutdown and repression in these images are notably pessimistic. Here, emotions are conveyed through darker colours, depictions of physical violence and abstract representations of suppression. These attributes highlight a significant stylistic difference from the other categories, as the creators explicitly portray the authorities and their actions as monstrous and violent. In these images, the apple is depicted as a powerless victim of imprisonment and physical violence, it is gagged, peeled, chased by a police officer with a baton and handcuffs, about to be torn apart, and hallowed out at its core. In some of these portrayals, the apple appears not only as a fruit but also as a fully-grown, fruit-bearing tree. Yet despite their maturity and abundance, these trees are shown either being cut down or positioned as if they, too, are destined to be cut down.

Engagement motivated by a range of warm emotions is the most intense part of affect (Papacharissi 2015:15). Taking all images in Figure 9 as a whole, although the apple symbol typically stands for *Apple Daily* or the press in general, it could also be interpreted as an expression to symbolise the citizens who face similar challenges in protecting their right to freedom of expression, as they witnessed the repressions and silencing of dissident voices under the guise of national security.

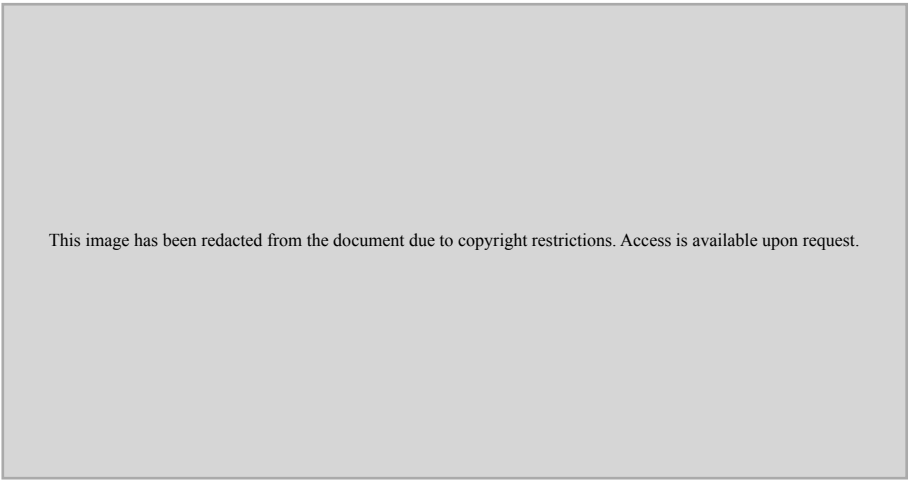



**Figure 9**
A collage of illustrations featuriing the apple after the shutdown. Source: Instagram.

Under repressive regimes, affective statements that communicate dislike and discontent with repressions can result in surveillance or punishment for those who express them (Papacharissi 2015:119). However, as the above images show, users of Instagram have not entirely held back by this threat yet. The significance of affect in promoting online participation despite potential punishment can be understood by considering participation as something that is shaped by shared social experience (Dahlgren 2018:11). Thus, affective engagement transcends individual opinions and expressions, entailing the desire of individuals to share their common experience, which, in turn, facilitates community participation.

Expressive captions embedded with strong emotions accompany these images to highlighting the seriousness and intensity of the issue in an effort to raise public awareness of the aggressive repression of free speech and the silencing of oppositional voices. An example of such a caption reads:[8]

> A confronting reality: A publicly listed media group can be searched without restriction, have its equipment seized, assets frozen, and employees detained for actions protected by the Basic Law. The justification for this was only based on an absurd interpretation of speech, with judgements made before any trial, and the authoritarian regime ignoring its own statute of limitations. If it happens to *Apple Daily* today, it could happen to the people of Hong Kong tomorrow. Do Hongkongers think they can keep their distance by fooling themselves with the ambivalent articles? Unfortunately, the invisible red line will still catch up with you. 'Communist' officials in Hong Kong have clearly warned that aligning with *Apple Daily* is a crime.

[8] Parts in Chinese was translated into English by the author.

> Even if you didn't break the law yesterday, there's no guarantee you won't be accused of a crime tomorrow. If you don't speak up, there won't be anyone to speak up for you. Act now or be silent forever. Have you woken up?

Intense warm emotions, particularly anger and apprehension, are expressed through the commenter's criticism of government interventions and a desperate call for action. The caption underlines the urgency of raising awareness and voicing out one's opinion on press freedom, whilst one can still enjoy some degree of freedom of expression. Here, two modes of engagement—affective and cognitive—are intertwined. On top of a sentimental visual depiction of the intervention, facts, and plausible predictions about democratic backsliding are extensively described and explained in words, inviting critical thinking about the alarming problem through the image. While affect is impactful in energising rituals of public and private life (Papacharissi 2015:9), a cognitive mode of engagement provokes reflections on the implications of the problem and draws on the knowledge of citizens spur participation (Dahlgren and Hill 2023:20).

Furthermore, when citizens actively participate in the media, produce content to discuss political issues, and express dissatisfaction and frustrations with their leaders, political agency is at play. Power relations are involved when participation is facilitated by the media, as the media is never a truly neutral carrier of messages (Dahlgren 2013:22). Under a repressive regime, challenging and criticising unequal power relations in the media is a bold expression of political agency. However, when anger and resentment derived from discontent or distrust of the leadership are expressed with ambivalent humour, the engagement can be perceived as less destructive or aggressive. Affective engagement in the form of internet memes is one example of how opinions that challenge the 'powers that be' can be effectively communicated to those with shared contextual knowledge, without easily being deemed as rebellious or defiant.

The humorous tone in these meme-like images often serves as an emotional outlet, enabling participants to express thoughts and feelings that are socially, culturally, and politically taboo (Phillips & Milner 2017:96; Gusic and Lundqvist 2023:6315) —and in this case, politically taboo opinions, as well. Figure 10 demonstrates examples of how the Chinese leader is mocked by artists in some of these images, by portraying him as being threatened by *Apple Daily* with references to internet memes.

Since being handed an unprecedented third term as president, Xi Jinping has been described by Western media as China's most powerful leader in decades (McCarthy et al. 2022; Kwan and Hawkins 2023). As modern China's longest-serving president, he wields significant and unchallengeable power. While confronting the leader directly may result in serious political and legal consequences, we understand from meme studies that humorous and satirical expressions allow citizens to engage

in difficult, controversial, problematic and dangerous topics (Goldstein 2013; Gusic & Lundqvist 2023:6315).

In this set of images, the Chinese leader is depicted as Winnie the Pooh (hereafter 'Pooh'), the fictional bear, in reference to a viral Internet meme from 2013.[9] From a participatory public perspective, audience members tend to add their own variation to an expression when they appropriate and recommunicate it (Phillips & Milner 2017:103; van Waarden 2022:73). With twists and turns, the creators of these images amplify the perceived threats of *Apple Daily* from the Chinese leadership's perspective, presenting a common narrative that the harm and danger symbolised by *Apple Daily* and voices of dissent are exaggerated by the leadership, which reacted with overly drastic measures.

Cartoons are a form of visual satire that convey the creators' moral reflections on the political issue with humour (van Waarden 2022:62). Depicting the Chinese leader as a chubby cartoon character can be seen a way for the public to express political agency by criticising the leadership, while simultaneously mitigating potential risks. Humour embedded in memetic representations offers a way to navigate the risks of crossing boundaries or breaking taboos. Drawing from meme studies, mocking an official for exaggerating the newspaper's threat to national security can be understood as a coping mechanism that enables the image creators to release sorrow or frustration (Gusic & Lundqvist 2023:6316). In the following section, I will further break down the visual and textual elements of each image (see Figure 10) and discuss their underlying meanings in terms of how citizens participate and practice their political agency via mockery of the leadership.


**Figure 10**
Mockery of the Chinese leader. Source: Instagram.

[9] A photo of Chinese leader Xi Jinping and US President Barack Obama walking side by side during the former's visit to the US in 2013 was paired with a similar image of Winnie the Pooh and Tigger and shared on the Internet, which quickly became an internet meme.

The first picture on the left shows a simple motif that displays the cartoon character looking fearfully at a black-coloured apple balancing on his nose. The image is captioned '20210617', the date when the authorities raided the *Apple Daily* newsroom for the second time. The colour of the apple can be associated with another popular cultural reference. In Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Evil Queen attempts to kill Snow White with a poisoned apple. She brews a potion that transforms an ordinary red apple into a poisonous black one, which then fades back into red as a disguise. The black apple symbolises evil and malice; one should thus be wary of its presence. In this image, Pooh is seemingly anxious and troubled by the black apple, as illustrated by his frowning face. I interpret this as an instance in which the apple is rendered villainous, paralleling the authorities' criminalisation of the newspaper. Here, the black apple symbolises a great threat to the leadership, as it shows no fear about standing directly on the Pooh's face—highlighting the critical stance that *Apple Daily* dared to take in representing the voice of the opposition in mainstream media, and the boundaries they pushed to report on issues that were unfavourable for the Chinese Government. This fearless approach can be interpreted as threatening the leadership and its rule; *Apple Daily* is thus portrayed as playing a significant part in shaping public opinions with a strong pro-democracy and critical stance that challenges the pro-establishment camp and their leaders.

Moving onto the second image, it tells a similar but slightly more elaborate story and is accompanied by the written text: 'Woah f***! Take this away from me! I hate the apple flavour!', as he reacts with disgust to a jar of honey labelled with an apple symbol. The caption reads, 'I have no words', communicating a sense of speechlessness. According to a dictionary definition, 'speechlessness' is a reaction to a state of shock or intense emotion, and emotional perception and processing are key to the experience of lacking words (Guralnik 1980; Dietz et al. 2023). In this context, the event triggering the creator's shock is illustrated through the cartoon image. Considering Pooh's character in the original cartoon, we know that he loves honey and makes every effort to obtain it (Winniepedia 2025). However, in this image, Pooh's usual fondness for honey is portrayed otherwise due to the apple symbol. The apple symbol 'contaminates' and turns the honey into something appalling, preventing Pooh from enjoying it. As a response, Pooh demands that the jar of apple honey be discarded and explicitly and verbally expresses his hatred towards anything apple-flavoured. Similar to the first image, this image underlines the significant impact that *Apple Daily* had from the leadership's perspective. To them, infusing the otherwise desirable and perfect honey with 'disgusting' apple flavour symbolises how *Apple Daily* was disrupting the 'perfect' media environment, in which only pro-Beijing voices are represented in the mainstream media. To safeguard this preferred media environment, *Apple Daily* had to be eliminated—just like how the apple honey must be discarded.

Finally, the two images on the right in Figure 10 share a dramatic narrative to illustrate Pooh/Xi's fear of the apple in a two-part tale. In the first image, the character takes a bite of a red apple; in the second, he succumbs to poisoning and dies lying face down in a pool of blood. The visual expressions are accompanied by two lines of texts, 'Winnie eats an apple' and 'Then he f***ing dies' respectively. This 'poison apple' narrative once again refers to the *Snow White*'s cinematic portrayal of the red apple as a deadly poison, whereas the strong language in the written text can be read as a reflection of the emotional response from the image creator upon receiving the news of *Apple Daily*'s shutdown. The story that these two simple graphics tell is rather direct and powerful: the apple is so harmful in the eyes of the authorities that it may bring baneful consequences to the regime. Here, the free press is imagined as an immensely destructive force that threatens those in power, embodied in the form of a modest fruit. This absurd, nonsensical representation is playful, to an extent where the portrayed violent death of the character seems both dramatic and trivial simultaneously. It serves as a humorous joke that can also be understood as a political statement in response to the Government's interventions in the news media.

In all images (see Figure 10), the power dynamics between Pooh and the apple are illustrated in direct, uninterrupted ways. This can be interpreted as a criticism to Xi's incontestable position that enabled him to bypass the Basic Law and to target a media company and journalists within a so-called free press environment. Building on this interpretation, it could be the artists' way of communicating their suspicions that the decision to target the newspaper may have been made by the Central Government, rather than Hong Kong officials. This assumption questions Hong Kong's status as an open and pluralistic society, challenges the validity of its legal system, and further casts doubt on the constitutional principle of 'One country, two systems' and China's increasing control over local politics in Hong Kong.

Up until this point of the discussion, only pessimistic emotions are highlighted in the analysis. However, as the following section shows, what sustain this form of civic talk is not only the solidarity driven by collective anger and sadness, but also meaning-making engagement in the form of expressions of appreciation and gratitude towards the newspaper's past contributions to democracy. After discussing three different types of affective engagement with the closure of *Apple Daily*, which are predominantly motivated by warm and strong emotions, it is important to draw attention to other passionate forms of expression, as well.

Unlike the previously described affective engagement, which focuses on the event, the leadership, and the authorities, these following examples of engagement stems from citizens' appreciation for *Apple Daily*'s journalism work over the course of nearly three decades. When the media company announced its closure, readers and citizens responded with online messages of gratitude and appreciation. These expressions, in both textual and written forms, were fuelled by appreciative emotions, reflecting the significance of *Apple Daily* in the citizens' everyday lives.

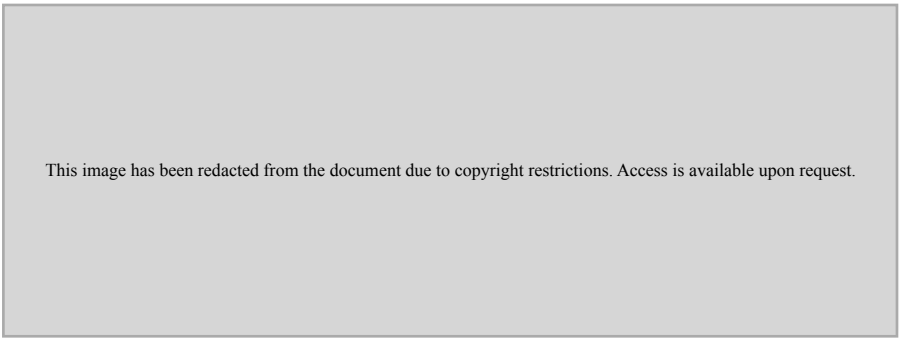



**Figure 11**
Collages of images showing appreciation and graitude. Source: Instagram.

Figure 11 consists of three images that can be viewed as expressions of appreciation from the artists to the newspaper. In general, warm emotions including comfort, gratitude, affection, trust, and serenity are reflected in the studied images shown above. Appreciation can be conceptualised as an emotion (Fagley 2018:1), and drawing the connection between the symbolic apple and the individuals depicted in the visuals, such emotions can be associated to a deep level of appreciation for the newspaper and connected to the hope that it will be revived in the future. Hugging it, holding hands with it, sitting beside it, watching it grow, protecting it from the rain… in these images, the apple symbolises something precious yet vulnerable. The written texts embedded in them also convey the value the creators ascribe to the apple and their reluctance to part with it.

Phrases like 'Thank you, Apple for protecting Hong Kong—a newspaper that truly belongs to Hongkongers—take care', 'Let there be hope', 'Farewell!', 'To be continued', 'Silently guarding until the last moment', 'a formless being will survive in all ways possible' reflect the artists' appreciation for the symbolic *Apple Daily*, especially for its service to the newspaper readers. Many emotions are at play here, including sorrow over bidding farewell to the newspaper, the desire to protect it, and the belief that the apple will grow again from seeds and return stronger. My interpretation of the overarching message here is that people should not lose hope easily. Even though the organisation has been dismantled, the spirit and values it represents will endure through acts of remembrance. If citizens keep *Apple Daily* and what it stands for in mind and continue to fight for democracy, it could potentially reemerge and appear in a new shape and form. In the same category, there are two particular posts that have received exceptional engagement from viewers on the platform, receiving over 9,000 and 4,500 likes respectively (see Figure 12).

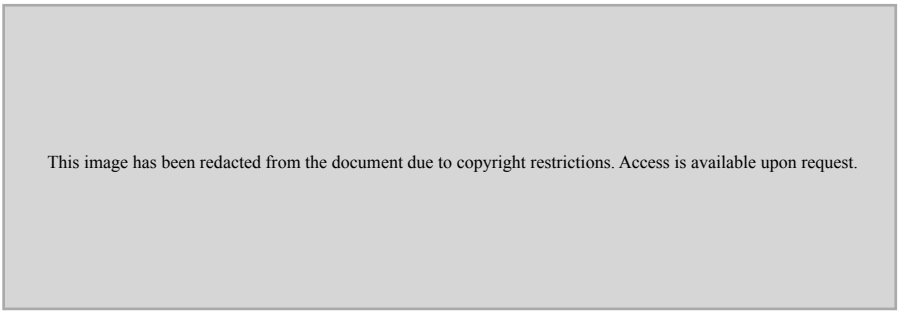



**Figure 12**
Left: An illustration featuring the apple and an appreciative character. Right: A 7-frame illustration depicting the re-growth of a biten apple. Source: Instagram.

Although the quantitative aspect of engagement is not the focus of this analysis, it is an insightful finding that affective engagement that involves this warm, emotional feeling of appreciation to the newspaper and its work, was well received by other members of the community. The image on the left resembles the types of flashcards typically used to teach toddlers and children the alphabet. It features a green background that contrasts with white text reading 'Aa—Appreciate'. In the centre, a person is depicted bowing to a large red apple, illustrating the action described in the text. Interestingly, the simplicity of this graphic design opens for many interpretations. For example, a viewer scrolling through Instagram posts who is unfamiliar with Hong Kong politics might see this image as an ordinary. They might wonder why someone is bowing to and showing respect to an apple, but likely won't think much more about it. However, with political knowledge of the Hong Kong context, we can understand that the appreciation is dedicated not to any apple, but *Apple Daily* in particular.

For individuals who interpret it in a similar manner, warm emotions alike can be provoked. This is reflected in comment section, with users commenting 'Salute 🍎', 'S for salute', 'respect❤️', 'appreciate you and other illustrators' works, there will be traces left in history', and 'the last farewell😢 don't let go of your anger💢'. The community's shared appreciation for *Apple Daily* led to engagement with this Instagram post, as members showed support for both the newspaper and the creator of the image by 'liking' the post and commenting on it. The number of 'likes' garnered by this post also indicates that warm expressions can motivate more active engagement and participation compared to cool ones, especially in a time when citizens are constantly exposed to negative news and may become politically fatigued and disengaged.

We now turn to the image on the right on Figure 12. This seven-framed illustration depicts seven different stages in the life cycle of an apple. It begins with the story of how the apple is being discarded, then fell to the ground, becoming rotted, to

being a part of the soil, sprouting from a seed, growing, and finally becoming a big and leafy apple tree bearing numerous fruits. The image is published alongside the caption, '🍎 to be continued… @appledailyhk', showing a direct support for *Apple Daily*. In my interpretation, this image serves as a metaphorical expression of the past and future of *Apple Daily*, symbolising its journey through the life cycle of an apple. The regrowth of the apple tree after decay and rot conveys a powerful message, suggesting a hopeful vision for the future and promoting the importance of showing resilience, which can nurture the engagement of younger generations. Nonetheless, one underlying meaning symbolised in this seven-part story is that the regrowth of the tree can be a prolonged and gradual process. While it requires immense effort and perhaps even sacrifice, the outcome will be worthy for those who demands a democratic life.

To summarise, the findings in this part of the chapter indicate that expressions of affect were prominently shared in images disseminated after the shutdown of *Apple Daily*. As the discussion shows, these visuals are capable of evoking a range of predominantly warm emotions among users on Instagram. The visual representation of passion, anger, sadness, and appreciation played a significant role in narrating the event from various perspectives, often enhanced by borrowing forms and styles from other media genres. The affective mode of engagement is often intertwined with cognitive engagement, as the images highlighted critical thoughts and opinions about the event, authorities, and their policies. In this way, users are not only encouraged to reflect, but also called upon to act. This mixed mode of engagement connected individuals online, fostering a sense of shared emotions and opinions and thereby creating a communicative link between them (Dahlgren 2018:12). Nevertheless, the closure of the newspaper did not mean that discussions about it among citizens had come to an end. The next part of the analysis shifts the focus from the talk that occurred while the events were unfolding to the talk surrounding remembrance in the subsequent period following the shutdown.

## Remembering Apple Daily

Images that fell under the thematic category of remembrance were published at least six months after the shutdown and throughout 2023 and 2024. Although this dataset is the smallest in size among all categories featuring the apple symbol, it has empirical significance, as it helps us to know whether citizens have continued their active engagement with the issue, or disengaged after months and years following the event. In the analysis shown previously, the strong willingness of citizens to stay engaged and supportive of the now-shutdown newspaper was emphasised. However, this separate set of data indicates a difference in the level of engagement, compared to previous periods. The number of productions and public sharing of images featuring the apple symbol has gone down markedly, and user engagement

with the posts follows the same trend. It is important to note that the number of likes can be directly determined by the number of followers of a particular account, and that many of these images are created by amateur and professional artists who do not have a big following on Instagram, but still had a collective impact during the peak of the movement. Again, although engagement statistics are not the focus of this research, this gives us an idea of the evolvement of engagement throughout and after the 2019 social movement.

Notably, there remains some engagement on Instagram regarding the *Apple Daily* shutdown, even three years after the event took place. However, the low level of interaction surrounding this kind of content also suggests that many users may have disengaged from circulating the images, which may in turn have discouraged further production. There are several possible reasons for this. Some people may lose interest over time, others may find talking about negative news exhausting, and some may fear the potential consequences of engaging with politically sensitive topics. From a media audience perspective, the personal decision to refrain from political discussions in the media can arise from sustained exposure that evokes feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Understanding disengagement is therefore a way of knowing how citizens distance themselves from politics. In some cases, choosing not to participate is an active choice that helps citizens to avoid negative or potentially harmful content (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:11). With this in mind, the analysis of this set of materials focuses not only on the new themes that emerged during this specific period of time, but also those that have disappeared.

I argue that sustaining the acts of remembrance of *Apple Daily* is significant and meaningful for pro-democracy citizens in post-NSL Hong Kong as a space for staying in touch with both the communities and the democratic values that these individuals strive to uphold. While personal and collective memories of *Apple Daily* can survive in intangible forms that are embedded in an individual's mind, or they can be expressed in more tangible and shareable forms, like written notes or artwork. In either form, these memories can be transformed into knowledge of this episode in the democratic movement in the longer term and be passed on to new generations. Without a doubt, *Apple Daily* played a significant role in the democratic movement and the daily lives of their readers, former employees, and journalists. These groups and communities may share a sense of responsibility to reinforce for themselves and others the importance of a pro-democracy voice in mainstream media by highlighting the consequences of suppressed free expression and recalling the value of press freedom.

The act of remembrance can be driven by a moral imperative (Blustein 2008:251-263)—that is, individuals may believe in the value of remembering *Apple Daily*. In the following section, I will discuss how a sense of moral responsibility plays a role in encouraging continuous engagement with the apple symbol in civic visuals in the aftermath of the closure of *Apple Daily*. In order to examine how acts of remembering are facilitated by engaging with the apple symbol in this empirical

case, I draw on Casey's (2000) conceptualisation of the mnemonic modes of remembrance in analysing the images that were disseminated months and years after Apple Daily's closure. By categorising the empirical material under two mnemonic modes—reminding and reminiscing, the part of the analysis highlights how citizens remind themselves and one another of the sorrowness associated with losing the newspaper and of the importance of not forgetting these events, as well we how they collectively reminisce about the past.

## Reminding and reminiscing about what has been lost

Reminding is the first mode of remembrance observed in images produced in this post-shutdown period. According to Casey, reminders play a crucial part in our lives, because we as humans, we often worry about forgetting (2000:90). By surrounding ourselves with reminders, we hope to protect our memory—and thus our existence. Reminders can take various forms. For instance, a written note on a grocery list or a map with marked locations could constitute a reminder. In this empirical case, it is the images imbued with relevant civic talk symbols that serve as reminders for pro-democratic citizens. In particular, hope, resilience, loss, and solidarity are recurrently prompted by these discussions on the matter of remembering *Apple Daily*. In terms of aesthetics, a warmer palette is often used when expressing hope and resilience, as compared to the cool tones and colours used in images focusing on the repression.

As an important note, the date these images were shared is significant for understanding what remembrance means to the citizens. In next to all cases, the images were published on the anniversary dates of the last publication and the shutdown of *Apple Daily*. While reminding can be something that one does deliberately, it can also happen spontaneously (Blustein 2008:250). In the case of remembering *Apple Daily*, it has become a yearly ritual for some individuals to remind themselves and others of the date of the closure, by means of creating and sharing visuals on Instagram. By eliciting emotions through rituals, this kind of content may remind people of the key meanings of participation (Jasper 2014:60).

Figure 13 presents an image published on 23 June 2023, the second anniversary of the shutdown. While apples have been depicted in various shapes and forms in previous examples, the apple in form of green sprouts stands out as a rather refreshing appropriation of the symbol. Accompanying the image is the caption '20230623 Second year following Apple Daily's cessation of publication'. Given the simple composition of the image and the straightforwardness of the written caption, it appears that the content of this Instagram post is reduced to essentials. This minimal and non-descriptive aesthetic approach may seem uninviting. However, an intriguing reading of the image can be made if one takes the cultural meanings of sprouts into account. Across various cultural and religious contexts, the sprout is often seen as a symbol of new beginnings, growth, hope and resilience.


**Figure 13**
An illustration of two green sprouts, published on the second anniversary of *Apple Daily*'s closure. Source: Instagram.

It symbolises new phases of life or ambitions, emphasising a future built on past achievements. Its growth requires nurturing, protection, and patience, which supports the sprout in its gradual development into a tree. With this in mind, this seemingly unprovocative depiction of two green sprouts may carry the capacity to evoke a sense of hope and resilience. More importantly, it serves as a reminder of the events and helps sustain the remembrance of Apple Daily even two years later.

While some visuals remind the viewers of hope and resilience, others highlight the losses (of *Apple Daily*, the free press, freedom of expression) and solidarity. The images associated with these codes have a distinct visual style compared to those symbolising hope and resilience. Cooler colour tones and symbols of death, such as a memorial stone and the Grim Reaper, are used to remind the viewers of the 'death sentence' imposed on *Apple Daily* exactly two or three years ago. Studies of protest movements suggest that when individuals sacrifice themselves for the collective good, society expects mutual respect for these individuals and their sacrifices (Jasper 2014:58). Building on this, I propose that citizens also bear a sense of collective responsibility to remember and honour these individuals and their sacrifices. This sense of responsibility fosters the strengthening of solidarity and ongoing engagement in collectively remembering the victims of repression, even after many years. To sustain this remembrance, it is crucial to motivate others by continuing to share evocative messages through different means. In this case, when people come across images featuring the apple symbol and depictions of the imprisoned owner on Instagram, they will be reminded of the crackdown on the free press that took place in 2021 and those who received punishment for defending it.

Figure 14 demonstrates an example published on 24 June 2023, the day following the second anniversary of Apple Daily's cessation of operations.


**Figure 14**
An illustration of a masked character holding an apple, published on the second anniversary of *Apple Daily*'s closure. Source: Instagram.

The caption reads:

> An apple a day, no one can deceive me
>
> Apple Daily, Hong Kong's last bastion of free speech was forcibly shut down two years ago
>
> Still, the apple has not completely vanished
>
> Its spirit endures with us and flourishes everywhere
>
> Forever in my heart, with all of you
>
> #AppleDaily #AppleDailyHongKong #TwoYearsSinceAppleDailyClosure #NextDigital #DisappearingFreePress #AnAppleADayNoOneCanDeceiveMe #NeverForgetOurRoots #BlossomEverywhere #SowTheSeeds #AlwaysInOurHeart

Although the visual content plays a part in catalysing remembrance when viewers engage with these images, in this case it is accompanied by lengthier written captions, as a more elaborate story is necessary for reinforcing the importance of remembering. Depending on the creators and their intentions in posting, the prompting texts had different tones and narrative approaches. While the styles of writing can be categorised as either more informative or emotionally engaging, there is often an overlap between the two. The informative captions tend to serve as a reminder of the event(s) and include more details. By mentioning specific dates and individuals, viewers are urged to revisit relevant information and are reminded of particular episodes in the event of the shutdown. Here, the blend of informative details and affective expressions operates together to evoke remembrance, simultaneously grounding the memory in factual specificity and emotional resonance.

Enquiry into how we remember past events can also lead us to explore other aspects of remembrance, particularly the emotions and attitudes expressed in the act of remembering (Blustein 2008:252). The poetic caption conveys a mix of emotions/feelings ranging from resilience and hope to loss and solidarity. The opening lines of the text show a strong sense of resilience against deception and simultaneously evoke sorrow by mentioning the loss of *Apple Daily,* once the symbolic representation of free speech in Hong Kong. As the writer is holding onto the belief that the spirit of the apple lives on, the closing line of the caption highlights a sense of connection and solidarity with those who share these values and memories. Hashtags such as #NeverForgetOurRoots, #BlossomEverywhere, #SowTheSeeds and #AlwaysInOurHearts are, presumably, not primarily used to enhance visibility on the platform per se. Instead, they articulate messages that call to mind the sense of defeat associated with the failed struggle for press freedom two years ago. These hashtags also emphasise that the connections and bonds formed among those who defended free speech persist. Maintaining solidarity within the community and honouring those who made sacrifices remain crucial, no matter where those people are now. Remembrance is significant in the sense that the values and memories should be kept alive through continuous engagement and talk in different forms.

To reminisce is to actively re-enter the past. When coding these images, a common theme of collective remembrance of *Apple Daily* emerged. Remembrance in acts of reminiscing about the past appears to be shared practice among a small number of members within this affective community, months and years following the news outlet's shutdown. When viewing this set of material as a whole, what are there for the public to reminisce about seem to be the lost freedom to choosing a news source, reading opposition newspaper in public, challenging the hegemonic power structures, and exercising the citizens' rights to gather and to protest. Images in this category often depict moments and activities that can hardly be reenacted in the current political environment. By emphasising the good of the past while

simultaneously highlighting collective losses, these images are interpreted in the analysis as affective vehicles that evoke viewers' memories. As I will discuss in the following analysis, such visual narratives can prompt viewers to recognise the stark contrast between the present and the past in terms of the freedom they once enjoyed. Confronted with these differences—and the rather bleak reality—viewers may be drawn to reminisce about the earlier times, when Apple Daily was still in operation and the public could still gather to commemorate the Tiananmen Square student protesters at the annual vigil. The following discussion will also highlight how civic visuals may constitute to the act of remembrance of key social events without overwhelmingly conscious effort. This approach to civic visuals suggests that the sustaining of collective remembrance within civic communities can be facilitated by practices that may be less organised and smaller in scale, yet nonetheless emotionally charged through sentimental representations of shared memories in form of visuals.

Published on 23 June 2024, Figure 15 depicts an outdoor scene at night, indicated by the silhouettes of trees and a starry sky in the background. The central focus is what seems to be a public art installation featuring an inflated, balloon-like red apple anchored to the ground. While being positioned in a seemingly peaceful and calm area, there is a sense of fragility surrounding this gigantic apple as it is barricaded and displayed under protection. Positioned outside these barriers are five individuals sitting on the ground. Each individual can be seen holding a copy of a book or newspaper and reading from it. This image is accompanied by a written caption 'June 23, 2024, three years since *Apple Daily* ceased operations'. Serenity and calmness characterise the overall mood conveyed by this image. Against the dark, still, and quiet background, is a depiction of what can be understood as a group reading event.

When this image is viewed on the mobile Instagram app, small details—such as the tiny logo on the newspaper's front page—could easily be overlooked. By contrast, viewing the image on a laptop, where zooming is possible, may reveal these otherwise hidden clues. In Figure 15, for instance, the depicted printed copies held by the individuals can be identified as those of *Apple Daily*. Although Instagram users using the mobile interface may struggle to discern the logo due to screen size and limitations on image zooming, the large apple at the centre of the composition still enables viewers to associate this artwork with *Apple Daily*, not to mention the caption directly references the third anniversary of the shutdown. Nonetheless, this example offers insights into how platform-specific features and designs may potentially shape visual interpretation as users may reach different readings of the same image due to constraints or functional limitations inherent to the platform.

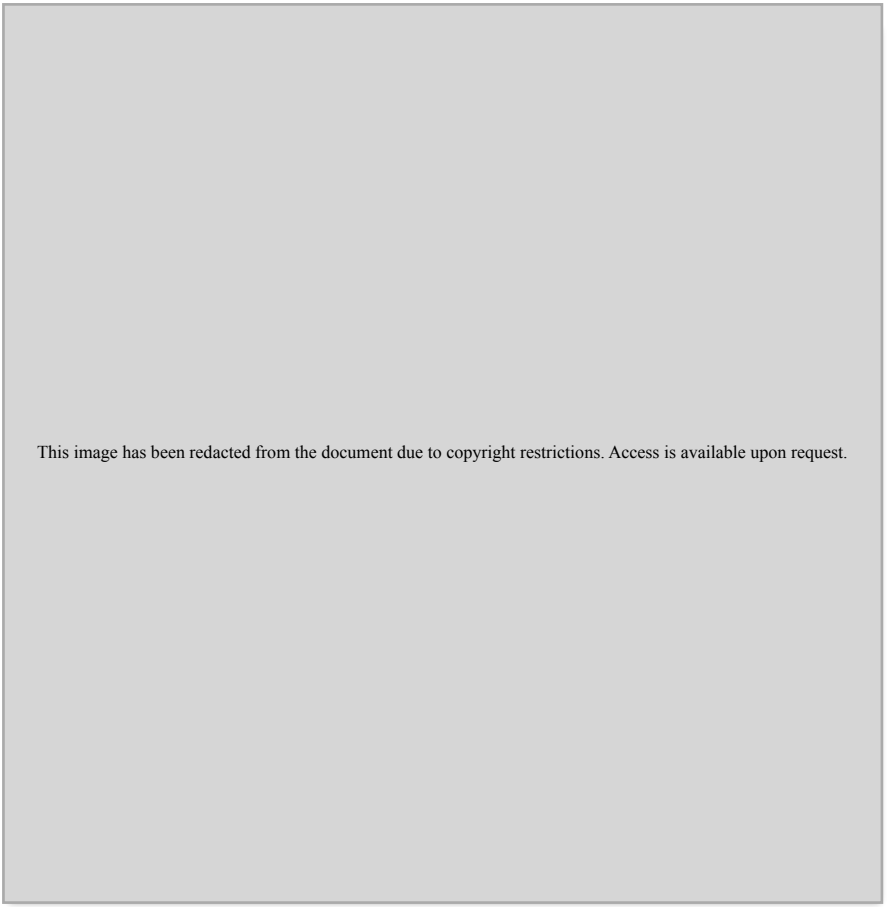



**Figure 15**
An illustration featuring a gigantic apple, published on the third anniversary of *Apple Daily*'s shutdown. Source: Instagram.

Both objects and activities depicted in Figure 15 can be seen as parts of everyday life in Hong Kong. Activities such as reading a copy of *Apple Daily*, gathering in groups, and viewing public art installations were once taken for granted, before authorities shut down newspapers or stopped issuing permits for protests and demonstrations. Under this calm atmosphere, these people are not only reading the newspaper individually, but they are also simultaneously protecting the apple-like installation collectively. In this interpretation, as some degree of freedom was stripped away from the citizens, these basic, communal, and unprovoking activities no longer seem as easily accessible as they once were. In a similar vein, we may understand this image as an expression of reminiscing about freedoms that were

previously taken for granted, and also as an artistic effort to underline a sense of determination of upholding the democratic value that *Apple Daily* once represented. Beyond the cultural significance of this artwork in representing the how this civic symbol is missed by the public, it evokes a sense of remembrance for the overlooked civic practices that Hongkongers once engaged without much thought, but which they now find themselves missing.

A key difference between the two modes of remembrance, reminiscing and reminding, is that reminiscing often happens in social settings and has a more communal aspect (Casey 2000:115). In Figure 15, this social characteristic of reminiscing is also reflected in a sense of harmonious collectiveness through the depiction of engagement in the same activity that takes place at the same location, and at the same time. Reminiscing as a mode of remembrance fosters us to indulge in enjoyable recollection of past events, which is quite a gentle way to remind ourselves and others of our responsibility of remembrance of these significant events. While reminiscing often happens unintentionally, it can be triggered by many things. The idea of the inflatable apple in this image might have been inspired by one of the city's public inflatable art installations. It might not have been an apple, but it reminded the artist of the apple symbol. We will not know that for sure. Regardless, the symbolic meaning of the apple in this image tells us that the apple may have taken on a different shape or form in our lives, but it remains protected in people's memories and continues to be a part of the collective remembrance.

# Discussion

The media both shape and reflect civic cultures (Dahlgren 2002:23). By highlighting the ambiguous nature of the visual material discussed in this chapter, it is clear that, citizens must also rely on up-to-date information—as well as cultural and political knowledge—to interpret these images. As a notable constituent of civic talk, these visuals acquire significance within a transitioning and increasingly repressive digital media environment. Media plays a central role in providing resources and information that help citizens navigate this evolving communicative practice. At the same time, ambiguity enables these affective communities within the civic culture to express their opinions and emotions through both disruptive and non-disruptive aesthetics. Communication scholars emphasise that this ambiguous mode of expression is a constitutive dimension of public communication that cannot be avoided (Berndt & Sachs-Hombach 2015 :272). Such subtlety is crucial for maintaining a voice without attracting unwanted attention from the outgroup.

Moreover, this chapter has addressed how knowledge construction involves active appropriation as cultural and media landscapes constantly evolve (Dahlgren 2009:110). The appropriation of the apple symbol creates a powerful expression for

concerned and engaged citizens who acquire political information and then translate it into civic knowledge. This kind of talk is significant for experimenting and fostering new ways of understanding and expressing opinions surrounding controversial current issues in a precarious socio-political setting. In addition, the findings of the visual analysis suggest to how ordinariness and ambiguity attached to a seemingly mundane symbol like the apple potentially make citizens more comfortable talking about a political topic that is contentious, yet closely tied to their everyday lives. Different interpretations are made based on personal knowledge, experiences, and memories, creating dynamics in the process of the interactions.

While a media organisation can be shut down over night, the apple, despite its recently gained symbolic meaning, can hardly be censored realistically. Thus, the ambiguous apple may allow for continuous informal dialogues and participation even when censorship becomes stricter, in which it holds the capacity for encouraging people to appropriate the symbol and in turn, participate in civic talk. Moreover, these civic visuals could be seen to contribute to the preservation of civic knowledge and memories of this key episode in the pro-democracy social movement in Hong Kong. Inviting collective and individual remembrance in civic talk helps to ensure that citizens' passions for engaging and participating in defending free speech and supporting independent media organisations will not be forgotten.

Overall, ambiguity plays a vital role in constructing knowledge and facilitating civic talk on Instagram regarding the shutdown of *Apple Daily*. The analysis underlines its potentials to offer citizens alternative ways of expressions as they navigate censorship on social media. Following this approach, civic visuals are understood as expressions of civic and social identities of those who strive to uphold shared democratic values within communities of like-minded individuals in post-NSL Hong Kong. A key finding of this chapter highlights that the production and circulation of civic visuals do not vanish immediately after civic participation in the public sphere is suspended. While the scale of production and level of engagement may eventually diminish when a protest or movement has come to an end, the ordinary aesthetics that civic visuals embrace is significant in integrating these crucial discussions into everyday engagement on social media. In this way, remembrance of important civic issues is recurrently encouraged within the communities.

Throughout the analysis and upon arriving at the conclusion, a key aspect of interpreting civic visuals that deserves special attention concerns time. Interpretations of images and their meanings are dependent on the situation of the artist (Hermerén 1969:18). As events continue to unfold in real time, interpretations may change accordingly. The situations of the creators and their community are constantly evolving as new political developments take place. Unfortunately, changes observed in Hong Kong over the past few years have led to more pessimistic views of the city's democratic development. As mentioned earlier,

Jimmy Lai was convicted in 2025 on all national security charges brought against him. The court described him as the 'mastermind' behind conspiracies to use *Apple Daily's* publications to collude with foreign governments and destabilise the Chinese Government by (Davidson 2025). This ruling marks another turning point in Hong Kong's civic life and sends a chilling message to the public that the press freedom that once set the city apart from the rest of the country and the continent is now undergoing systematic erosion.

Nevertheless, while the media outlet and its owner have been silenced, the apple is yet to be entirely removed from civic talk. An important takeaway from analysing these civic visuals is that the story of the democratic movement does not end here. Citizens' beliefs and aspirations for progressive changes are communicated through these artworks, which vividly envision a future—near or afar—nurtured by the democratic seeds being sown deep in the soil of today. In the next chapter, I will dig deeper into memory and its meaning for civic engagement, focusing on a politically prominent yet culturally significant symbol.

# 7. Nostalgia, Resistance and the Everyday: The White Bread

## Introduction

Chapter 6 presents a salient civic symbol in the empirical material that has endured time and the political developments of the past years. Yet, as this thesis shows, some civic symbols are shorter-lived. During the Anti-ELAB Movement, a brand of store-brought white bread branded, Life Bread, unexpectedly became central of civic talk on the internet. This local grocery product was quickly adopted by pro-democracy citizens and transformed into a symbol of resistance almost overnight. Its appropriation in civic visuals began after a direct confrontation between police and protesters on 21 November 2019, which was live streamed. During a dispersal operation at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, which had been occupied by protesters for several days in an effort to disrupt city operations (Ho & Wan 2021), tensions escalated following a spontaneous and discriminatory remark made by the police. They mocked the protesters' social status and ridiculed their contributions to in society, based on the protesters' consumption of white bread during the occupation. Simultaneously, the police asserted their own superiority by boasting about the nice dinner plan they had after their shift (AFP 2019). This unpremeditated incident marked the beginning of Life Bread's transformation into a symbol of resistance within the protest community, which eventually led to become one of the recurring symbols in the civic visual repertoire between November 2019 and July 2020.

In this chapter, I draw on Dahlgren's framework and concepts from memory studies to argue that, while initial engagement with the bread symbol was driven by the community's anger and shock in response to the police's comment, the continued engagement with the Life Bread symbol was sustained by the participants' collective memories and shared cultural identities among participants. For the community, white bread became more than just a symbol of resistance—it was also a mediated object by which they could communicate nostalgic memories and fight to preserve the Hongkonger identity. Based on findings that fall into two thematic categories—aesthetics of everyday life and passion for nostalgia—this chapter discusses the aesthetics of the ordinary in civic visuals and examines how collective

memory and nostalgia are highlighted in the citizens' months-long engagement in appropriating the bread symbol.

This analytical chapter is structured as follows: The first part introduces how bread is regarded as a medium in political communication and discussion across cultural backgrounds. The second part provides a contextual background on Life Bread, a newly appropriated symbol of resistance, and how it became locally associated with various cultural, societal, and political meanings. The third part presents the findings of the qualitative analysis of the empirical material, delving deeper into how expressions of cultural identities and values overlap with the expressions of political opinions in some civic visuals. Through exploring the Hong Kong identities and cultural memories from the colonial period, I argue that citizens' passion for nostalgia, or the 'Old Hong Kong' aesthetics in this case, plays a significant role in their acts and expressions of resilience. The final section concludes the chapter's findings and discussion by arguing that ordinary aesthetic and nostalgic qualities embedded in civic visuals help prompt affective engagement and evoke shared collective memories of the past. By mobilising generational social knowledge and emphasising on local identities in the expressions, citizens extend the discussion of a controversial issue from the political sphere to an aesthetic realm.

## Bread as a medium for political communication

While food might be considered as something politically neutral in the everyday life, it is in fact deeply political. For many researchers, it is therefore impossible to disentangle the political dimension of food from its biophysical, social, cultural, and economic aspects (Flannery & Mincyte 2010:423). Food plays an important role in forming cultural practices and meanings within groups, thereby simultaneously to solidifying group identities and differentiating them from one another (Anderson 2004; Mak & Poon 2024:1108). It also constructs a language that reveals and communicates broader cultural beliefs through eating and drinking habits (Douglas 1972; Murcott 2019 [1983]). In contentious politics, food is sometimes transformed into a political device that is used to police people and empower one cultural group over another, serving as a tool to undermine adversaries (Bronfman & García 2023; Klein 2020:4). Food is highly symbolic and can be understood as a code of power (Parasecoli 2019; Chan 2010:204) For many scholars, food is considered a site of contestation, capable of revealing unequal power relations and reinforcing boundaries between social groups (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1988; Holtzman 2006; Mintz 1996; Parry 1985:613). On one hand, the production and distribution of food are often controlled by those who are in power. On the other hand, power from below constantly challenges this hierarchical structure through contentious actions.

The relationship between class and food is also closely intertwined. This correlation can be observed in all societies in which belonging to a specific class determines what kind of food one gets to eat. One can speculate about another person's social status based on their food preferences, tastes, and consumption. As the traditional class-based structure dissolves in modern society, the lines between class and food are becoming more blurred. The dissolution of class-based structure has resulted in individualisation, which, in turn, has led to the democratisation of food and eating (Lang 1999). Food is thus re-imagined as a leisure activity available to anyone who can afford it, regardless of one's class (Scott and Duncan 2020:467). The status of different types of food also changes over time, as food trends come and go. The relationship between social status and food derives from individual values and desires, as well as temporality. In terms sorting people into a particular class based on their diets, the saying 'you are what you eat' is therefore a rather outdated statement that oversimplifies the complexities and nuances in peoples' eating habits and practices in today's world. However, it is undeniable that the perceptions of food and class remain intertwined in contemporary society across cultural contexts. Food is likely to remain a medium for prejudice, as it provokes and reinforces both cultural and societal stereotypes and a sense of community.

## Western stereotypes and the popularisation of white bread in Hong Kong

Among different types of food, bread has been discussed in various academic disciplines, including food studies, cultural studies, social studies, and linguistic studies. The expansion of bread wheat from Southwest Asia to every part of the world has made bread a universal food that transcends geographical and cultural borders (Bonjean et al. 2001:1). In parts of Europe, bread is perceived as the essence of life (Markova et al. 2022: 1004), a 'nexus of economic, political, aesthetic, social, and health problems' (Counihan 1997:286), and a culturally important nutrition source with a strong connection to religious and family rituals in agrarian countries (Ruzaitė 2012: 105). In other contexts, bread constitutes important parts of identity, family, and even governmental social policy (Naguib 2024; Midré 1992).

Like many foods, bread is associated with stereotypes. In the case of white bread, it has been associated with different negative preconceptions since its invention and later its popularisation through mass production. During the Industrial Revolution, technological advances enabled the mass production of finely milled white flour, leading white bread to become widely available and accessible to everyone. At the time, white bread was seen in an American context as a symbol of industrialisation and the working class (Gill 2021:150). Later, during the Great Depression, it served as a crucial food source for the impoverished when resources were scarce. Consequently, white bread became strongly associated with poverty, reinforcing its reputation as 'poor people's food'. For the rich and elite, dry white bread is

synonymous with a lack of taste and low eating standards. The quote 'people who eat white bread have no dreams' describes the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding white bread and those who consume it.[10] The labelling of the white bread is an example of how social structures shape what we eat—by labelling and stigmatising a certain food. Manifesting social stigma around white bread through labelling is a way in which wealthy people criticise the poor and discriminate against them, thus reinforcing social and economic hierarchies (Bobrow-Strain 2012:36).

In Hong Kong, white bread was popularised in the 1960s. This occurred when the Garden Company began manufacturing white bread in its local factory and branded it as 'Life Bread'. In Hong Kong, white bread is commonly seen as a household staple and a breakfast essential that is not exclusively consumed by the poor. One of city's signature meals, 'Hong Kong-style French toast', is typically made with white bread, which is seen as a representation and reflection of local culture and the city's colonial history, respectively. Marketed as a nutritious and affordable option with added vitamins, Life Bread has become one of the most recognised and available store-bought white breads in Hong Kong. From a cultural perspective, the product packaging—a blue-and-white gingham-patterned print that is commonly associated with domestic life (Whang and Haar 2014:8), also played a role in popularising the product. Over the decades, this specific gingham pattern has become an iconic representation of local Hong Kong products and the inspiration for many creative crafts and products that highlight the local culture. Garden Company's own marketing campaign also has a strong emphasis on the relationship between their products and the collective memories of generations of Hongkongers. In a Facebook post titled, 'Stories of the blue-and-white gingham print', followers of the Garden Company's page were encouraged to share their personal memories associated with the iconic pattern and Life Bread.[11] The post notably drew responses from users who reminisced about their school days and family experiences from the younger years.

## Life Bread vs. hotpot: contextualising the symbol

In November 2019, students and protesters occupied the Hong Kong Polytechnic University for almost two weeks. Various episodes of violent clashes between the protesters and the police took place during this days-long deadlock, with protesters using bricks and petrol bombs against the police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons (SCMP 2020). After days of confrontation, protesters were trapped inside the campus, deprived of resources, as all the entrances and exits had blocked in order to capture anyone who tried to leave. Refusing to surrender, some managed to leave the university by shimmying down ropes or leaving through the

[10] A quote from American fashion editor Diana Vreeland in the 1990s (see Bobrow-Strain 2012:ix).

[11] The Facebook post can be accessed here: .

underground pipe network, according to a reporting from the *South China Morning Post* (2020). During a dispersal operation on 21 November, the police employed psychological pressure on the protesters. In a now-deleted video posted by *Hong Kong Citizen News*, the police were seen using powerful flashing lights to disorient protesters, while an officer addressed those inside the university campus through a megaphone. During his speech, the officer mocked protesters with provocative comments, calling them incompetent and accusing them of lacking principles, which further intensified the psychological pressure:

> I can see that many of you are eating Life Bread, bitterly cold Life Bread. […] When I finish my shift later tonight, you will be eating your Life Bread, and I will be heading to Shenzhen for Haidilao [a popular Chinese hotpot restaurant]. [cheering sound] I am going to enjoy chilled beer, while you are munching on your Life Bread! Personally… Life Bread … the one with the blue-and-red packaging [another officer shouts 'rubbish!' in the background] … yes… what a trashy food. Typical food for commoners and elderly scavengers… how unfortunate. Especially having to eat it on a cold night.[12]

This speech quickly ignited controversy after the footage was livestreamed and circulated online. The police's discriminatory remarks and mockery of both the protesters and the less wealthy citizens offended many people. The following day, citizens organised and participated in a Life Bread-themed lunch demonstration, as part of the daily lunchtime protests held across various districts during the Anti-ELAB Movement. Participants brought along loaves of white bread to show support for the protesters and the brand (AFP 2019). In one YouTube video, an elderly protester is seen confronting the police while holding a loaf of Life Bread, shouting 'It is delicious!' as he eats a slice. On the internet, intense discussions emerged comparing bread and hotpot. Many highlighted the nutritional value, affordability, and the cultural significance of Life Bread, challenging the police's implication that a mainland Chinese hotpot chain is superior to the locally produced loaves. Life Bread and hotpot became the 'culinary symbols of Hong Kong's political divide', with the former dubbed as a 'new symbol of resistance for Hong Kong's pro-democracy protesters' (AFP 2020).

[12] The speech was transcribed from a backup video uploaded on a Facebook page of an activist community. This transcript only includes the segment where 'Life Bread' is mentioned.

# The aesthetics of everyday life in civic visuals

While bread has been part of many political discourses in global contexts, the emergence of the representation of Life Bread in local protest material was not premediated. Prior to 21 November 2019, this specific product had not been associated with any political actions or communities in Hong Kong. The sudden surge of engagement with the bread symbol can therefore be seen as spontaneous connective action and an expression of solidarity. On top of being a familiar product to generations of Hongkongers, my interpretation of the images suggests that the mundane nature of Life Bread plays a significant role in its transformation into a symbol of resistance. Its ordinariness embraces connective common experiences across a diverse group of people, allowing everyone to interact and engage with it without barriers, creating stories and memories that can be easily communicated and understood by others. By the same token, what sets the representations of this civic symbol apart from the others in the collected material is that most of the images that are discussed in this chapter are remarkably ambiguous. The processes of contextualising and interpreting these images thus require extra effort, in comparison of those discussed in Chapter 6. As a result, before delving straight into the empirical material, the following sections aim to provide a detailed account of how iconography and Deweyan aesthetic theories come into play in developing a more organised (and effective) approach to deciphering civic visuals, particular those that are highly ambiguous.

In understanding how interaction with a very mundane object can cultivate appreciation, it is useful to turn to Yanagi's (2019) work, which explains how experience can nurture aesthetic insights into beauty of the everyday objects. For Yanagi, beauty should not be confined to visual appreciation, nor should the aesthetic value of miscellaneous, mundane objects be dismissed (2019:11). Rather, the argues that the meaning of aesthetics can only be gained by going beyond the visual to consider the practical use of objects that are deeply rooted in daily life (ibid.). This perspective highlights the significance of appreciating common objects in our day-to-day surroundings and foster an understanding of how everyday, mundane objects like a teapot, or a loaf of bread, can be deeply appreciated and cherished by those who share experiences with them. These experiences may not be particularly remarkable, yet they are central to everyday living and involve objects that people are familiar with and know through and through (Yanagi 2019:32).

For citizens, ordinary white bread may be imbued with significance tied to how it has brought joy and happiness to their everyday lives, often in subtle ways that might usually go unnoticed. As the following discussion shows, by engaging with the symbol in their visual creations, citizens embrace the ordinary and simplistic aesthetic quality of white bread, which stands in stark contrast to the judgmental remarks from the police, who dismiss the very same quality and criticise it as worthless. As Dahlgren notes, the commitment to upholding democratic values is

not grounded solely in rational-cognitive decision-making (2009:112). Rather, it is the passion for democratic values—embedded in the small, taken-for-granted practices of everyday life—that forms the foundation of civic virtue.

### *Approaching the analysis: embracing diverse perspectives and ambiguities*

Shared experiences with the Life Bread are reflected in the striking similarity among a portion of the visual data. Before delving into the iconological analysis of individual images, it is crucial to address some general characteristics of this dataset. For example, there are many similarities shared among various portrayals of the bread symbol. However, these images should not be viewed as undiversified and homogeneous engagement. On the contrary, it is this author's interpretation that they represent a form of connective action that communicates solidarity from diverse perspectives it. From both an aesthetic and iconographic points of view, these similar images produce distinctive meanings for members of the community.

Firstly, the aesthetics of these images can be understood by focusing on the receptive end—whether participants appreciate, perceive and enjoy engaging with the symbol and images (Dewey 1934:49). In addition to understanding how the images are crafted, examining the engagement on the part of the other participants (e.g. by reposting and leaving comments) is a key to constructing an understanding of the community. Second, the iconography of the white bread symbol is not limited by the visible elements portrayed in the image. An iconographic interpretation of a symbol goes beyond the natural or primary level of an image to consider how the symbols are being used repeatedly (Hermerén 1969:81). In specific terms, one must learn about the conventions and traditions surrounding the symbol and familiarise oneself with the cultural qualities attributed to it.

Nevertheless, the visuals' individual creativity and unique approaches to using the symbol in their work should not be generalised. Although some of the images in this dataset appear to have similar visual compositions, they invite people with diverse perspectives and experiences to engage with the bread symbol through distinct artistic styles and networks. Since people have different life experiences and perspectives in life, the meanings they draw from the same image will all be unique, even if they share a common value or identity.

Perspective is key, not only because it shows how we really see, but because it enables us to organise and manage our perceptions (Mirzoeff 2009:29). An expression is artistic if it evokes, assembles, accepts, and rejects memories (Dewey 1934:162). This means that, regardless of what an artwork portrays, it leaves an artistic impression on the audience if it succeeds in communicating a thought or an emotion. Oftentimes, the subject matter in many artworks is a representation of something that already exists, like the white bread in this case. While traditional

aesthetic theories in the realm of fine art often dismiss or criticise works of art for lacking originality when they appear to represent or imitate existing objects, Dewey challenges the validity of judging an artist's expression solely based on the artwork's subject matter, arguing that art is inherently 'an act of reproduction, or imitation' (1934:6-7). For Dewey, if an act evokes qualitative energy that invites thoughtful actions through the assimilation of meanings from a person's past experiences, it should be considered an act of expression (1934:63). Therefore, the representation (in this case, what is visually represented in the artwork) is not the sole focus of my interpretation of the images. Rather, the artists' and participants' perspectives and experiences will be highlighted in order to provide a better understanding of the values and identities they embrace and reflect in their civic participation.

Despite their similarities in terms of composition, colours, and styles, these illustrations convey different meanings, as they express different emotions and communicate varied personal experiences of the world (Dewey 1934:86). The ambiguity of meaning in an artwork emerges from the individuality of the viewers. In other words, participants engaging with these visuals might have slightly different interpretations of the same image, based on their various life experiences. However, well-informed members of a community who share democratic perspectives and a common interest in addressing the same social problem can potentially interpret these civic visuals from similar standpoints, as they draw on similar shared references and sources of information.

From a Deweyan perspective, it would be nonsensical to ask an artist about the meaning of their work, because even the artist would find it had different meanings at different times in their life (Dewey 1934:108). Individual stories and memories tied to Life Bread are thus central to understanding the nuances of engagement with this symbol. In Highmore's (2011) view, one the one hand, people are surrounded by things with which they interact. Yet on the other hand, they often ignore some of the most accommodating objects in their lives (Highmore 2011:58). This incapability to notice common yet essential things in life is perhaps a reflection of how people interact with a store-bought, factory-manufactured loaf of white bread. Once purchased and brought home, it is likely to be either placed on the kitchen counter or tucked away in the cupboard. No special thought is invested in this likely routine process. In other words, the bread is a mundane object that unexpectedly creates extraordinary experiences in the situation of everyday life. This sense of ordinariness is also reflected in the visual material. As opposed to provocative protest materials that trigger immediate responses, the straightforward and minimalistic depictions of the bread symbol serve more as reminders of the values and stories shared by generations of Hongkongers.

An iconological interpretation of an image demands attention to the meanings—not only the meaning of the object depicted in the image, but also the meaning of what is absent. In many images (see Figure 16), the bread is clearly the salient subject.

However, ambiguities emerge in the absence of a background, such as an everyday setting or a descriptive detail by which to contextualise these images. Understanding the ambivalence between what is present and what is absent in images is a significant step in the creation and interpretation of meaning, particularly as regards meanings that might otherwise be ignored or overlooked. For viewers unfamiliar with the police incident or the cultural value of Life Bread, the symbolic meaning of these images cannot be readily interpreted. This creates a barrier between informed citizens and those who lack contextual knowledge. Rather than seeking to reach a wide audience, engagement as such has an exclusive focus on the' echoers', i.e. those who communicate solely within the confines of their own political in-group (Tsai et al. 2020:2).

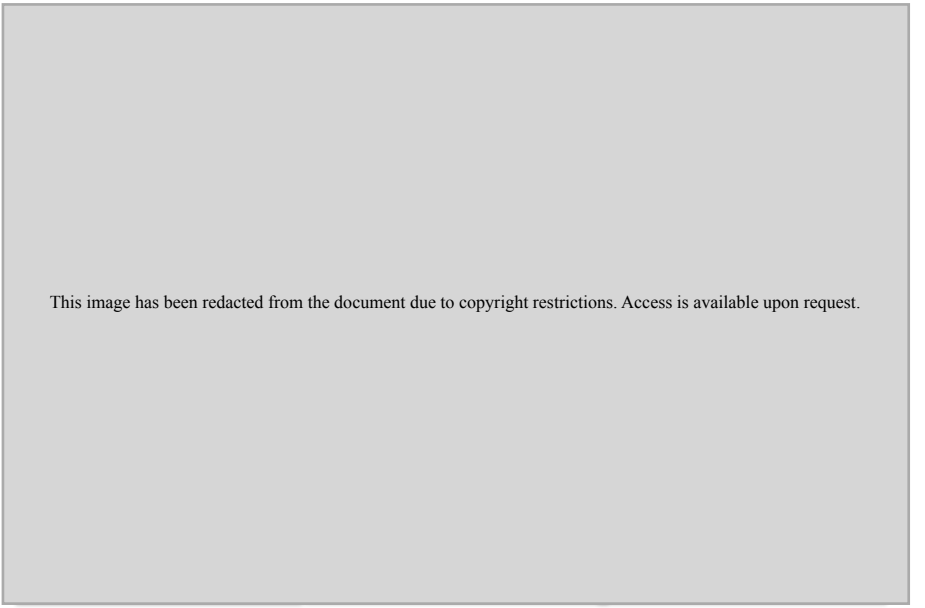



**Figure 16**
A collage of illustrations featuring the bread symbol. Source: Instagram.

Ambiguity remains as a key to my understanding of the processes of how participants experience and interact with the bread symbol. I approach this by interpreting ambiguity as a concept that invites participation, which encompasses a complex process embodying expression, involvement, and intervention (Dahlgren 2013:18; Rosanvallon 2008). However, participants may not be simply attracted to these civic visuals by ambiguity alone; they must be passionate about engaging in talks surrounding Life Bread, whether in cultural or political terms. As Dahlgren (2009:85) writes, there will be no participation without passion. I view the surge of

image production on social media within days of the dispersal on the university campus as an expression of the passion by creative individuals in the community. Passion, in turn, requires outlets for expression. From this perspective, engaging in civic talk can therefore be seen as an outlet for like-minded individuals to share their passion, in order to address problems as part of the community. This shared passion motivates and enables individuals to participate and exercise their civic agency.

In Dahlgren's view, all engagement in politics involves passion, and motivation cannot be fully understood if affect is absent (2009:85). He also criticises traditional democratic theories for their excessive emphasis on rationality and reasoning, neglecting the emotional and passionate motivations that drive engagement. This element of passion is also essential to aesthetic perception from a Deweyan aesthetic standpoint. On one hand, passion serves both as a motivation for engagement and as a quality that enables participants to appreciate, comprehend and enjoy taking part in the conversation. On the other hand, Dewey warns that passion can also ruin the aesthetic quality of an experience, if the perception is overwhelmed by extreme rage or fear (1934:51). From his perspective, order and fulfilment are essential to aesthetic experience, and these can only be achieved when the artwork is encountered with a degree of sensory control appropriate to the specific occasion and situation (ibid.). Excessive passion without patience may therefore lead to disruptions and deviations in the experience, rendering it anaesthetic.

## *A proposed analytical model for civic visuals*

Based on how the bread symbol is presented as an everyday and nostalgic object in the images, I began to wonder how politics may be implied in some of the visual clues from an iconological perspective, prompting the question: what kind of disguised symbolism does the bread carry in these representations? To understand why artist would disguise political meanings in everyday objects and practices, I draw on Scott's (2005) concept of hidden transcript. Throughout the history of resistance, repressed groups often find themselves in what Scott describes as the 'ironic position', in which their actions inadvertently reinforce the power of the ruling class (1985:29). Yet, despite the constraints they face, subordinate groups often seem to find subtle ways to express dissent, even through the smallest acts, such as spitting in the master's tea. Scott (1985) refers these symbolic forms of everyday resistance as 'the weapons of the weak'.

While occupying or marching on the streets could be seen as more direct and potentially more effective ways of doing protests in modern movements, I suggest it is equally important to acknowledge that subtle resistance still creates significant meaning to individuals and their community under the erosion of free speech observed in many countries today. As they integrate resistance in their daily lives, such as boycotting a beloved product due to the company's political stance, it

manifests a notable emotional impact that contributes to an experience. Noticing how the participants engage with the bread symbol, by focusing on the everydayness and the simple aesthetics rather than highlighting the repression or the particular moment of conflicts, I argue that this form of engagement is a characterisation of subtle resistance through visual means in the digital age. This can be better explained if we can identify all contextual clues that are placed alongside the bread symbol in these images to understand what does the Life Bread mean to the community.

Figure 17 presents an image with the caption 'the miracles from ordinary stuff'. It was published on Instagram in May 2020, a rare occurrence among this set of data, as most of them were published in November 2019 as an immediate response to the police incident, and the recurrence of the bread symbol on social media is less common and incomparable with that of the apple symbol. The sampling process of images embedding such a basic and somewhat random object was tricky, especially when it comes to eliminating all the non-relevant yet similar-looking illustrations of white bread that do not carry meanings in civic and political participation (the 'Life Bread' is also a popular motif for artists who integrate iconic designs from local culture in their work). To tackle this, I contextualised the image with captions, comments, and the posting date to help determine whether a certain image was relevant.

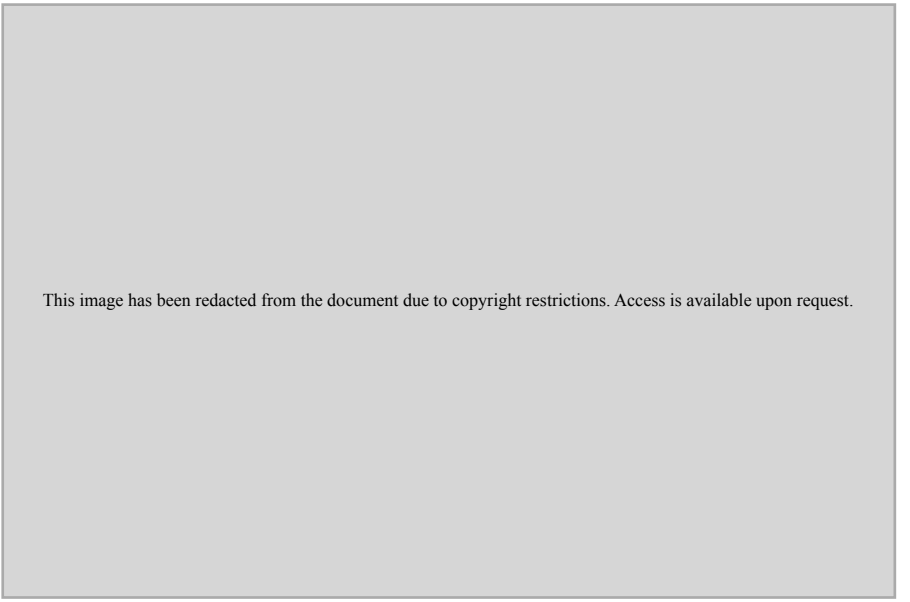



**Figure 17**
An illustration of five ordinary objects. Source: Instagram.

In this case, there are six elements consisting of five visual objects and a written text. From left to right and top to bottom, these elements are identified as follows: a clear grocery bag with three items; a pack of white sugar; a slice of white bread; a yellow umbrella; a sack of white flour; and the embedded text 'that's magic'. In the process of identifying and categorising the objects, Panofsky's three levels of iconographic analysis are particularly useful in revealing different meanings interpreted by participants with different experience and knowledge, and hence how the same symbol can be engaged very differently. Specifically, new meanings are revealed as one proceeds from one level of interpretation to the next. I find this way of distinguishing different levels of interpretation from one another is significant in creating a structured way to understand the various kinds of engagement with ambiguous expressions, especially with this dataset of the bread symbol. It also gives a clearer idea of how the circulation of these symbols occurs when sensitivity around political topics is rising in society in general.

To demonstrate how new meanings are revealed step by step, I developed a three-part model (see Figure 18), inspired by Panofsky's framework, to investigate the conventional and symbolic meanings of the images based on visual clues. This model could also be applicable in other empirical research, as a guiding tool for breaking down ambiguous or arbitrary cultural and political meanings embedded in visual content. In the following, I will elaborate on how I categorised the six abovementioned visual elements in Figure 17 with the help of the model.

The categorisation begins with coding the elements. The coding differentiates a 'pantry essential' and 'food item' from 'accessory', and a 'colourful' object from a 'plain' one. But overall, each item shares the code of 'household essential'. These codes help me to connect individual elements with each other, then allow me to construct three categories based on my iconographic interpretation of the visual elements.

I name the first and largest category *the disguise*. This category encompasses all objects and elements in the image that contribute to creating a disguise for the bread symbol. It includes objects meant to confuse the audience, clues that suggest something is out of place, and the symbolic meanings that are concealed by the disguise. In this image, the disguises are characterised as common and everyday objects, including the sugar, flour, grocery bag, bread, and umbrella—and the embedded text 'that's magic'. Every element of the disguises can be understood by any individual from any background, as they are all simple objects that people encounter in their everyday lives. The 'everyday' disguise facilitates an interpretation that this is an image simply conveying that ordinary stuff in everyday life brings a miracle (but what miracle?). Nothing is explicitly odd and out of place—or is it?

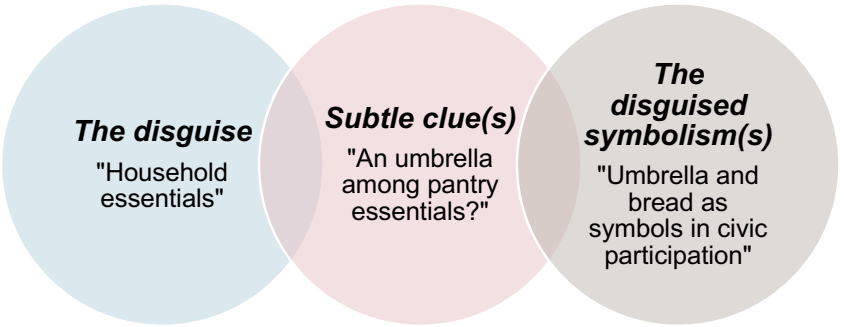



**Figure 18**
A three-part model to investigate ambiguous civic visuals.

In exploring whether there is something extraordinary in the image, I recognise how *subtle clue(s)* are hidden behind the disguises. This category consists of the hints that suggest something is slightly out of place, prompting the audience to take a closer look at the image and elements present (or absent). Although all the objects are common household objects, one of them is slightly different in nature from the others. While four of them are pantry essentials that are usually used and consumed inside a home, there is a yellow umbrella that does not fit into that category. The bright yellow colour of the umbrella also makes it stand out among all objects, as the rest are depicted with little colour. The colour and nature of the umbrella highlight its uniqueness among the other objects, which prompts the viewers to investigate further. Fortunately, the yellow umbrella is a rather easy case to crack, as it has been widely recognised locally and globally as the symbol and key image of the 2014 Umbrella Movement (de Kloet 2018). It began when umbrellas were used by protesters to shield themselves from pepper spray and tear gas during crowd dispersals, and when pictures of a sea of umbrellas at the protest were distributed through global media outlets, the umbrella became the icon—and even the name of the movement (Fung 2020). Various forms of protest art featuring the umbrella (often in yellow) emerged, such as illustrations in both digital and physical forms and paper umbrella installations, and graffiti at protest sites. The yellow umbrella was transformed into a symbol for democracy and a visual medium to communicate a political voice, as many pro-democracy citizens participated in changing their social media profile photos to pictures and icons of the yellow umbrella (McGarry et al. 2020:19). Based on its iconicity and political significance, the yellow umbrella certainly carries a symbolic political meaning in Hong Kong. Despite its prominent significance in the repertoire of the Hong Kong protest culture, the apparent ordinariness of the other visual elements creates a subtle guise for the explicit protest

symbol—the yellow umbrella—to be perceived as one of the ordinary things in the image. Its symbolic meaning is only revealed when the audience is aware of the contexts, including the values and identities of the cultural and political. Yet, once revealed, the umbrella serves as a clue that prompts an investigation into the underlying meaning hidden behind the guise of ordinariness.

The third and final category is *the disguised symbolism(s)*. In my analysis, this category consists of visual elements that carry symbolic meanings that go beyond the natural and conventional levels of interpretation. The yellow umbrella is understood as a prominent symbol of pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong over the past decade, rather than just an ordinary object. Its presence in the artwork signifies civic participation and resistance, which can be supported or confirmed by the presence of another visual element: the bread. Given the importance of the yellow umbrella, I consider that other elements within the image should be reevaluated for their intrinsic meanings. Exploring the intrinsic meaning is essential for an iconological interpretation that aims at understanding the world of symbolic values (Panofsky 1962; Shin 1990:17). The bread in the centre of the image, should not be interpreted only on a conventional level, but as a symbol that communicates a deeper meaning than ordinariness. It constitutes as fragments of information about the participants and their engagement with the symbol (Panofsky 1962; Hasenmueller 1978:290).

While appearing as 'just another ordinary object' alongside similar grocery items, the bread should be seen as a symbolic representation of resistance, a symbol that can be recognised and decoded easily by members of the community. Looking beyond its conventional meaning as an ordinary food item and considering it as a symbol of resistance allows a different interpretation of this image. The synthesized interpretation underlines how civic resistance can be subtly integrated into the everyday lives of citizens. What I am suggesting here, then, is that resistance is symbolised by the ordinary and mundane. By representing resistance in guise of everyday practices and routines, the conception of resistance becomes a symbolic and aesthetic dimension of everyday life.

This conception mostly aligns with Scott's descriptions of disguised resistance as a condition for practical resistance(1990:71). These subtle forms of resistance remain as ways for participants to achieve personal fulfilment or enhance community solidarity (Jasper 2014:17), as individuals might feel satisfied knowing they are personally committed to resisting dominant power in their own ways. For the community, developing a mutual understanding of these subtle expressions that are uncommonly known by outsiders contributes to the strengthening of solidarity and a sense of belonging to a collective, I argue.

Through this lens, the unconventional and seemingly apolitical bread symbol therefore contributes to the formulation of subtle resistance in everyday life. While in-group members are more likely to identify the hidden symbolism of these

representations of the ordinary life, it is unclear how they are interpreted by individuals who do not recognise the visual clues immediately. Under these circumstances, it might be useful to return to the three-part analytical model to approach the analysis. The following analysis shows another example of how this model can be used to guide the interpretation process.

On the conventional level of interpretation, Figure 19 shows a simple toast meal and a loaf of bread in the blue-and-white packaging. Yet, like in the previous example, a few symbolic clues are noticeable once contextualised. First, the original product logo that reads Life Bread on the packaging is being replaced here, by a shortened and simplified version of the protest slogan 'Five demands, not one less'. In my interpretation, the explicitness of the slogan, which was one of the most recognised and chanted slogans during the protests in 2019, is toned down by the disguise of a 'simple toast meal'. The phrase 'not one less' is not particularly meaningful if viewers are not aware of the protest slogan, making it an arbitrary element in this illustration. However, for informed viewers who are familiar with the protests as well as the police incident, it is not a farfetched interpretation this creation of this image is directly linked to these events. At the same time, the five demands are neither specified in the image nor in the caption. Instead, it appears to be subtly represented by the five slices of bread in the picture. With the absence of a provocative slogan and a subtle replacement of the brand name, this image appears to be a seemingly harmonious representation of a breakfast table or a picnic treat.

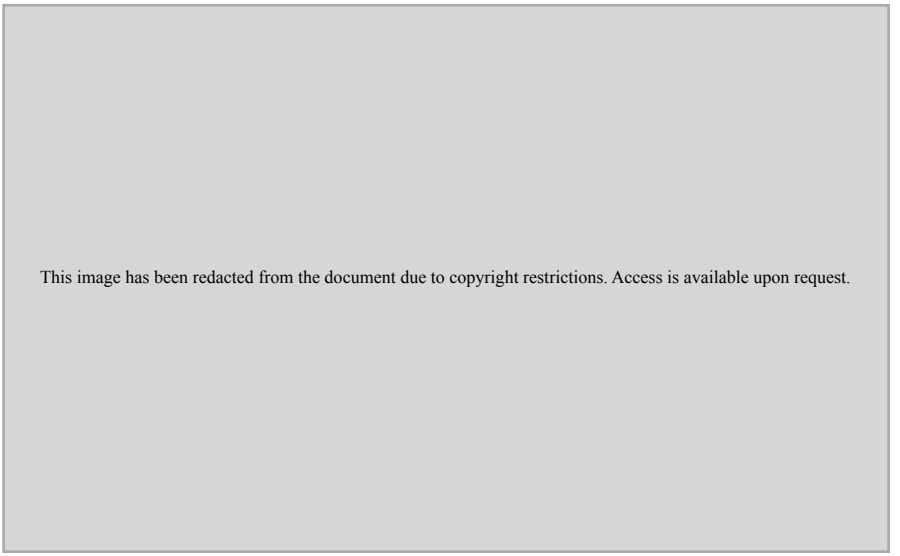



**Figure 19**
An illustration of slices of bread in a blue-and-white packaging branded as 'not one less'. Source. Instagram.

In this case, the disguised symbolism is not limited to the double meaning of the bread, but also of the slogan. In most scenarios, the slogan expresses a strong determination of the protesters to push forward their five demands.[13] However, when only the second part is chanted, this Chinese idiom signifies the importance of each and every person in a group, in which the absence of even one member would diminish the strength and completeness of the collective. This phrase, I argue, could be interpreted as a sort of embodiment of the principle of solidarity, specifically referring to that between participants in the movement, emphasising their mutual support for each other, their collective strength, and shared commitment to accomplishing the movement's goals. Solidarity among members of a subordinate group is facilitated and achieved through the means of conflict (Scott 1990:131). When the group gets attacked (in this case, through a verbal insult to protesters), citizens are committed to showing resilience against the outgroup and support for one another. In this image, 'not one less' expresses a commitment to the community, a bond between members, and the desire to protect the community.

## Passion for nostalgia

The second recurring theme in this dataset is the community's passion for nostalgia. As studies on memory in activism suggest, recollections of the past can be mobilised as mnemonic resources for activism, in terms of forming hope and presenting actions within social movements and beyond, as demonstrated in Chapter 6 (Daphi 2024:1006; Mousavi 2024:1143; Smit & van Leeuwen 2024:1159). By examining engagement with an appropriated food symbol, the analysis in this chapter explores the relationship between food and memory in activism, with a particular focus on nostalgia as a vehicle for civic participation. As Holtzman (2006:364) suggests, food plays an important role in constructing not only identity but also various sorts of nostalgia. Nostalgia, as a form of memory, can be understood both as 'a re-experiencing of emotional pasts […] and a longing for times and places that one has never experienced' (Holtzman 2006:367). Through engagement with the bread symbol, personal and collective nostalgia associated with Life Bread is mobilised by participants to evoke emotional connections with the community and the movement. These memories from the colonial era are used to present the symbolic value of Life Bread, and the local Hongkonger identity developed from this era.

The emergence of local identity and culture in Hong Kong began in the mid-1980s, a time when the city was experiencing rapid growth in demographics and economics (Lam-Knott 2019). This period is commonly referred to as the 'Old Hong Kong',

[13] The five demands include the withdrawal of the proposed bill, an inquiry into police brutality, retracting the classification of protesters as rioters, amnesty of arrested protesters and dual universal suffrage.

which is defined by a unique mid-twentieth-century aesthetic in popular culture. Nostalgia is generally understood as a sentimental longing for the past that encompasses both personal and collective memories (Pearsall 1998:1226; Cheung, Sedikides, Wildschut et al. 2017:303). However, in the specific context of Hong Kong before the turn of the second millennium, there was a collective urge to rediscover a sense of authenticity and cultural identity before the handover of sovereignty.

During this time, the city was engulfed by nostalgia (Huppatz 2009:15). Under this atmosphere, there was an upsurge of nostalgic media in the 1990s, including films and tv commercials. As Chan (2010:213) posits, nostalgia in Hong Kong was reinforced by anxiety and fear over the loss of autonomy and independence after the handover. In the beginning, the fashion of nostalgia even extended to the extent of renovating architectural landmarks to 'resurrect their formal colonial flavours' (Chow 1993:59). However, the colonial institutions only constituted a negligible part in this imagining of a nostalgic Hong Kong. It was rather the tight-knitted neighbourhood networks and conviviality among the grassroots citizens who defined the aesthetic of the 'Old Hong Kong' (Lam-Knott 2019). During that time, nostalgic media was produced with an interest in highlighting the collective fortitude demonstrated by the people of Hong Kong in past crises (Ma 2001:140).[14] These nostalgic narratives together constructed the idea of the 'Hong Kong spirit' in the media, which celebrates and defines the cultural identity of a Hongkonger as someone who is resilient and versatile. However, beneath the surface of this newly emerged cultural identity, Ma (2001:154) points out that there is a yearning for a sense of authenticity and origin between the lines in the nostalgic texts produced in the 1990s.

The idea of an authentic Hong Kong identity, underlined by these nostalgic texts from the 20th century, can be demonstrated by Hong Kong's 'Lion Rock Spirit'.[15] Named after one of the city's landmarks, the Lion Rock Spirit defines Hongkongers by their resilience, adaptability, and industriousness (Lam-Knott 2019). By means of the media, this 'can-do' spirit has been painted and understood as a significant part of the local identity since the 1970s, when Hong Kong was an industrial city, as a collective determination to improve lives despite facing overwhelming challenges (Jones 2022). The idea that success in life can be achieved through enduring hardships has faced criticism in recent years. Some argue that this concept is outdated and no longer relevant in the contemporary social context of Hong Kong, where people are increasingly inclined to express their opinions and speak out

[14] Crises including the deadly typhoon in 1962, water shortages in 1963, and the fatal landslides in 1972.

[15] Lion Rock is a mountain located in Hong Kong named after the shape of its ridges that looks similar to a resting lion. It is often referred as a collective memory and a synonym for the unbeatable characteristics of Hongkongers (Wu 2020:121).

against injustice rather than remain silent (Jones 2022). Nevertheless, Lion Rock remains a cultural icon that embodies local values and identity of Hong Kong that emphasises on endurance and perseverance, bearing cultural significance and conveying the characteristics of local relations (Wu 2020:128-9). As local relations evolve over time and with changes in society, the Hong Kong Spirit can be re-interpreted by younger citizens and continue to constitute an important part of an authentic local identity.

In Figure 20, two nostalgic icons from the 60s and 70s—Lion Rock and Life Bread—are remixed to represent the identity of Hongkongers in the present day. As the political landscape evolves in unpredictable ways and at an unpredictable rate, many citizens are assumably discovering that they have a certain fear for instability and are insecure about their future. For a long time, the Hong Kong Spirit embedded in the local identity was a driving force for the community to keep adapting to changes and enduring challenging situations. However, this generation of Hongkongers seems to be no longer bounded by the virtues of staying silent when repressed. This interpretation suggests that the symbolic meaning of the combination of the two cultural icons in this image represents the evolved identity of the hardworking and resilient spirit, yet the new attributes of being vocal are hinted at. Although younger generations may not have personal memories of that particular past, by recontextualising nostalgic media and collective memories, a sense of familiarity with the aesthetics can be nurtured.


**Figure 20**
An illustration of Lion Rock's sihouette in the blue-and-white gingham patterm. Source: Instagram.

The authentic identity of a Hongkonger is also highlighted in the hashtags associated with the bread visuals. While some of these Instagram posts underline their connection to the social movement by using protest-related hashtags, a few artists chose instead to highlight the identities of #hongkongers and #realhongkongers in their work. Others emphasise cultural significance of Life Bread through hashtags such as #hongkongoriginalflavour, #aflavourfrommychildhood, and #hongkongnostalgia. When comparing the use of hashtags in other posts that feature different symbols, the hashtags attached to the bread symbol involve both personal and collective memories in relation to experiences with Life Bread.

Hashtags emphasising moments from the past suggest that memory is utilised by the community as a resource for forming hope and informing civic actions for bringing changes (Mousavi 2024:1143; Rigney 2018:370-371). As Mousavi posits, hashtags can be regarded as a means of mnemonic work, in the sense that the topic is being repeatedly mentioned by different members of the community in both extensive and expansive ways (2024:1148). As a result of collective actions and memory work by a group, the mobilisation of collective memories is enabled by the use of visual representation and hashtags (Daphi 2024:1007).

Sightss of collective memories have contributed to a significant part of political and cultural discussions in Hong Kong since the beginning of the 2000s, particularly through an extensive media coverage on localists' campaigns against rapid urban development to preserve cultural heritage (Lee 2019:14-5). The term 'collective memories' has since gained prominence in popular culture, public discussions, movement activities, media representation, and even as a commercial gimmick. Chan (2017) discusses the social significance of collective memories in Hong Kong in her column article, 'Why do people in Hong Kong enjoy discussing collective memories?' The author explains that the concept of nostalgia plays an important part in shaping collective memories in Hong Kong society after the handover in 1997, a time when people were enduring significant social changes. In response to the rapidly evolving environment, people began to reminisce about the Lion Rock spirit. By carefully selecting important parts of collective memory and reminding people of them through different ways and forms, individuals or groups mobilise the past to make an impact on a current issue (Lee & Chan 2016 ; Chu 2023:249).

Indeed, collective memories are not simply retrieved, but always selected and constructed, and often contested and negotiated in society (Tenenboim-Weinklatt 2013:97). By exploring the selection of collective memories that are being mobilised, the ways in which people commemorate, reinterpret and build affective relationships with the past will be revealed (Jasper 2014:57). Furthermore, this allows us to understand important meanings that are held by people, events, and places from the past. By reminding people of a sense of how they become who they are, collective memory builds solidarity, guides decisions and actions, and challenges the present (Connerton 1989; Lee & Chan 2016 :998). Our identities are constructed and developed through emotionally based experiences (Dahlgren

2009:119) and cannot be reduced to a singular perspective. Members of the community may identify as Hongkongers, citizens, protesters, and students all at once. In that sense, their civic engagement may be empowered by more than one identity. The immediate reaction to the officer's commentary on white bread on Instagram reflects not only solidarity among community members but also the symbolic connections between the Life Bread and collective memories.

## Nostalgic communities

For activists, memory can be a means towards social and political change (Merrill & Rigley (2024:998). By considering social movement collectives as mnemonic communities (Zerubavel 1996), the analysis highlights how group-specific interpretations of the past contribute to shaping to new mobilisations (Daphi 2024:1007). As Zerubavel (1996:289) underlines, much of what we remember is actually not experienced by ourselves personally, but through the memory work of different mnemonic communities such as families, organisations, and nations. Within mnemonic communities, new members can remember events that had happened to the group even before they are a part of it and feel that they have experienced them as if they were part of their own past (Zerubavel 1996:290).

Posted the day after the incident, Figure 21 shows an illustration that symbolises the perceived strength and versatility of Life Bread, from the perspective of the community. In my interpretation, this portrayal of the bread symbol resembles the mecha robots, a genre of Japanese science fiction that features giant, humanoid robots. Iconic visual elements including the blue-and-white pattern, the Isuzu truck, and the red company logo are integrated into this depiction of Life Bread as a giant robot. The size of the robot is suggested by how the pilot compartment of the robot is made up of the entire front of a truck emblazoned with the logo of the Garden Company on its opened roof. As for elements that resembles the Life Bread, the gingham pattern covers the panels that stretch towards both sides of the robot, where part of the red logo can be seen on the bottom. Like many mecha robots in popular culture, this robot also has a few humanistic features, such as the eyes, arms, and legs. This representation suggests that, for the creator and the audience, Life Bread is regarded as more than a dead object. On the contrary, it is depicted as an emotional being with a facial expression, who shares an emotional connection with people in the form of a mecha robot. Here, Life Bread is reimagined as a powerful figure that offers protection to the community by the act of holding a loaf of Life Bread firmly in one of the robotic hands.


**Figure 21**
An illustration of Life Bread as mecha robot. Source: Instagram.

These emotional and humanistic characteristics of the fictional robots are understood as an important feature in this particular genre. In anime studies, the mecha genre is understood as an accommodation for sacrificial heroes who are not actually alive, but reflections of the characters and audiences' emotional states (Hernández-Pérez 2021:192). In this visual portrayal, both the bread and the delivery vehicle have been transformed from something ordinary and harmless into a powerful, emotional being that shares a connection with the community.

However, the deeper symbolic meaning of this image cannot be captured without contextualising it alongside the other embedded texts. As compared to other participants, this creator has a higher public profile as a creator who is known for their works in which they transform everyday objects in Hong Kong into robots that captures local essence of the city. Drawing inspiration from iconic local design, the artist seeks to create robots to which Hongkongers can relate by infusing the nostalgic memories from their own childhood, as described in one of their publications. The emphasis on nostalgic memories is also shown in the caption of the post, which reads:

> The police said that Life Bread only belongs to the lowly scavengers and the elderly people, and that makes them feel pity for the protesters. Yet, having grown up eating Life Bread during [my] childhood, I've always thought it was so tasty!

In this caption, the creator's own childhood memory is mobilised in the telling of the story from a third-person perspective. A sentimental longing for the past, a simpler time when slices of white bread were perceived as tasty treats for a young child, gives a glimpse of how nostalgia is embedded in the bread symbol before it symbolises resistance. Personal nostalgia, which is exclusively related to individual experience (Hakoköngäs 2025:1), becomes a powerful vehicle for countering the police's mocking of the beloved product that most people in Hong Kong are familiar with. While an emotional connection between this creator and protesters at the occupied site is revealed in this first part of the text, the caption continues with a quote from a Facebook post of a media influencer:

> Life Bread is nothing fancy; it is humble and grounded. Its packaging always reminds me of my primary school uniform. Though it amounts to only a few dollars, it represents dignity and has raised me through school and into the workforce. Is it really that you [the police] have never tasted Life Bread, or has the tens of thousands you earned in [protest] overtime pay made you too proud for its humble packaging? However 'dry and tasteless' it may seem, this bread embodies life itself and still nourishes […].

This emotionally rich quote captures the essence of the Life Bread nostalgia held by this group of Hong Kong millennials, who grew up with the brand and share memories of not only the bread, but also stories related to the product. In different stories told by participants in their engagement with the bread symbol, nostalgic childhood memories are constantly at the centre of these stories. Often related to the breakfast tables at home, these stories are based on individual experiences and personal nostalgia that indicate the role that Life Bread plays in this generation's collective nostalgic memories of food. Nostalgic food remembrance often reveals a contrast between an ideal past and a present loss. Regardless of whether the individual himself or herself has personally experienced it themselves, they can be informed about nostalgia from the community (Chan 2010:206). At the same time, ethnographic studies have shown how a certain food can evoke a nostalgic emotional resonance derived from a close relationship between people (Yano 2007:49-61). This is also evident in the caption of another post in the dataset that reads,

> Although I don't have a habit of eating breakfast […], every Hongkonger must have had Life Bread in their life, right? Since I was young, I've always liked its packaging design, the blue-and-white gingham print never felt outdated. Rather, it gives off a warm and familiar vibe. […] I believe Life Bread holds a special place in everyone's childhood memories. Compared to the [hotpot restaurant], which might shorten your lifespan, bread is for sure the better choice […].

For this nostalgic community, Life Bread is more than a symbol of resistance during the protest. It carries meanings that are created from childhood memories,

homemade breakfasts, and school life. It represents dignity, hard work, and modesty. It feeds, provides, and supports families in Hong Kong. Through engaging with the bread symbol as a collective, relationships between members are, by all indications, strengthened based on these similar memories and shared perceptions of Life Bread, which are passed on to other members through communicating stories, experiences, and memories. This understanding cannot be simply drawn from the concept of nostalgia, which refers to the sense of longing for what is lacking in a changed present and a yearning for things that are no longer attainable (Pickering & Keightley 2006:920). Rather, it draws attention to the notion of collective nostalgia that describes the social longing that emerges from deeply rooted shared conceptions about the past (Hakoköngäs 2025:1). Under these circumstances, collective nostalgia is prompted within the community as a response to the outgroup's deprecating comment on this nostalgic object. On the one hand, by triggering and directing group-level emotions through expressions of anger and offense, collective nostalgia promotes negative perceptions of the outgroup (Cheung 2017; Hakoköngäs 2025:3). On the other hand, it strengthens support for the in-group by eliciting a negative attitude towards the outgroup (Cheung, Sedikides, Wildschut et al. 2017:302).

The exclusion of outgroups, particularly the aggression toward the police and resistance against the mainland Chinese restaurant franchise, is evident in both captions discussed above. In this kind of engagement, counter-narratives surrounding both Life Bread and hotpot are presented in explicit terms. These narratives reflect strong scepticism toward the mainland-based franchise and the food they serve, which could stem from the idea of food localism and resistance in Hong Kong (Chan 2016). The rise of local organic food production in Hong Kong since 2000 can be understood as a response to growing distrust of food products from mainland China (Chan 2016:313). However, the resistance to mainland Chinese ingredients and food products does not only come from safety concerns. Rather, it can be seen as part of a broader resistance against China's dominance in local politics in Hong Kong after 1997 (Chan 2016:314).

In Hong Kong, the indigenous community has used food to assert boundaries between different ethnic groups (Chan 2010:206). By the same token, local Hong Kong food has also been used to demarcate regional and cultural boundaries between Hong Kong and the rest of China, and to strengthen the local identity by differentiating it from the rest of China (Chan 2016:322; Wang 2022:918). As Holtzman stresses, food plays a critical role in constructing identities (2006:364). As more mainland Chinese food and beverage businesses are growing their presence in the local food scene in recent years (RFI 2024), this poses a threat to the sustainability of local identity, culture, and businesses. The collective memories surrounding the nostalgic food are instrumental in defining, maintaining, and mobilising social identities (Licata & Mercy 2015:194; Kalstein et al. 2024:79). For

the nostalgic communities, Life Bread symbolises a part of the collective childhood memory while the hotpot represents the opposite of local identities.

Taken together, my interpretations of the Life Bread symbol in various examples of civic visuals suggests that it carries a much greater meaning than being a grocery item from the perspectives of the community. To a certain extent, it also contributes to defining, maintaining, and mobilising the local identities of millennials and older generations who grew up in the time when Hong Kong was experiencing an exponential growth socially and economically. The representations of Life Bread are embedded with nostalgic emotions shared by the creators and others in the community, which form a part of the authentic Hongkonger identity.

# Discussion

This chapter has discussed the Instagram community's engagement with the appropriation of white bread as an unpremeditated symbol of resistance, drawing from the Deweyan aesthetics philosophy. Despite being initiated by a moment of conflict, it is clear that the engagement with this symbol in civic visuals was motivated by citizens' collective memory of growing up in both colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong. As described in the presented analysis, the symbol represents both childhood personal memories of many participants, and Hong Kong's local culture more broadly. More importantly, the Life Bread seems to be mirroring parts of the 'authentic' Hong Kong identity perceived by citizens who identify as Hongkongers who have long been resilient, diligent, and adaptable.

However, the engagement with the bread symbol also shows how perceptions of this identity developed and evolved after the social movements and protests that took place in the last two decades. Through civic visuals, a developed Hongkonger identity is constructed by these participants and their experiences in social changes and collective civic activities. For them, Hongkongers might no longer be only defined by their values of stability or rolling with the punches. Rather, it represents people who care about the past, present, and future of the city; people who would engage in various ways to demonstrate the importance of upholding civic values including equality, solidarity, and justice. Identities, at the centre of civic culture, build on knowledge and values (Dahlgren 2009). Knowledge about the past of Hong Kong is therefore significant for the community when engaging themselves in sustaining the future development of the city.

Through participating in social movements and engaging in civic activities, rather than turning away from the problems, these citizens reject the 'silence is better' mentality that used to define the spirit and identity of Hongkongers when facing societal changes and challenges. My analysis suggests how this evolving identity is expressed through a nostalgic medium—the white bread. Its aesthetics of simplicity

and resilience connect participants not only to their own past but also to one another in the present. In general, these civic visuals communicate a sense of affection for the 'bitterly cold bread'. These depictions underline and celebrate often overlooked, ordinary yet nostalgic moments in life. Through Dewey's philosophical lens, I understand these civic visuals that foreground everyday life as examples of civic engagement that is driven by passions for collective nostalgia and by desires for perceived stability mid social society.

Nostalgia can be a private experience, but it is a deeply social emotion at the same time (Davis 1979:vii). This precisely summarises the findings from the visual analysis, in relation to how both individual and collective passion for the nostalgic white bread and its aesthetic are portrayed. Huppatz (2009:15) notes that the collective enthusiasm for nostalgia in Hong Kong began with a cultural trend in the 1980s called the 'nostalgia fever'. It was triggered by the anxiety experienced by some citizens before Hong Kong was transitioned from a British colonial city to a Chinese city. For some people, the shifts in governance and identities—and more broadly, the unknown future—implied a sense of fear and instability. Within this context, people developed a yearning for the past, in a hope to soothe their apprehension of the future in all aspects of social life (Davis 1979:71). With that said, I argue that it is important to consider the social significance of nostalgia and its aesthetics in sustaining civic talk in times of conflict and transition, particularly in terms of their capacity for inviting community members to engage in discussing current issues via the sharing of personal and collective memories.

Passion can be channelled constructively through participation. The bread symbol emerged at a time when the Hong Kong society—at least for many—was overwhelmed with distress, worries, and melancholy. Joy and happiness from little things could therefore easily be ignored, disregarded or forgotten. While the media has interpreted the Life Bread as a 'new symbol of resistance for Hong Kong's pro-democracy protesters' (AFP 2020), the artistic community rather seem to take advantage of the cultural attributes of Life Bread to create an aesthetic refuge in the midst of crisis. Through critical engagement with civic visuals, both artists and viewers may momentarily forget the chaos and conflicts unfolding in real time, and reminisce about a nostalgic era characterized and glorified by social progress and personal growth.

# 8. Playful Resistance

## Introduction

Having thoroughly analysed two individual symbols, this chapter shifts focus from close-up readings and in-depth discussions of particular symbols to a broader discussion on the playful qualities of civic visuals. Participation within the community is characterised by its playfulness and satirical nature, while also showing a capacity for citizens to reimagine politics as a game where they can either win or lose. Engagement with play is crucial for the development of the mindset required for more serious social practices, like knowledge production (Glas & Lammes 2019:220). While elements of play and playfulness are touched upon in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, this chapter aims to explore them further through the civic cultures framework with a focus on trust, as well as concepts of play and humour in civic engagement (Huizinga 1949; Glas et al. 2019; Mortensen & Neumayer 2021; Doona 2016; 2024).

As I conducted data collection on Instagram, it became increasingly noticeable that many accounts involved in publishing protest art during the peak of the movement stopped sharing new content, or shifted to non-political content. However, some who continued to post political content adopted more playful ways to address contentious political matters, in some cases even testing the boundaries of censorship through seemingly light-hearted means. Critical engagement with civic and political issues is often associated with and facilitated by a shared sense of humour within the community and their playful identities. Here, I argue alongside Huizinga (1949), who asserts that play is not the opposite of seriousness, rather as an activity with some form of serious, social intent, making playful civic visuals carry the potential for meaningful engagement that initiates and sustains critical civic talk online. I highlight how playful resistance in Hong Kong has evolved from physical games and street performances at rallies, to the engagement with civic visuals in the digital realm, where participants share a mutual understanding and interest in using seemingly harmless, playful styles to convey complex and contested political opinions.

Here, my empirical focus is on visuals that use or appropriate existing games—primarily their designs and elements—to engage in discussions on political topics. The set of empirical data is composed of images that appropriate different sorts of games and play to portray controversial political discussions that took place in Hong

Kong from 2019 to 2023. The collected data shows a diverse range of games that are creatively appropriated to convey dissent on different topics, from the proposal of the extradition bill and elections of the Legislative Council (LegCo) to the compulsory COVID-19 vaccinations and implementation of new regulations and laws. These include videogames, boardgames, puzzles, arcade games, and card games. Depending on the topic and scenario of the depiction, different kinds of game elements are used in the visual portrayals: representations of game components (such as a pawn or a playing card), visual design, rewards and punishments, and rules. To explore this form of engagement, I conduct a thematic analysis and critical visual analysis to develop categories and identify overarching themes, using an inductive coding approach alongside the analytical framework of civic cultures. The first theme—reimagining the game of politics—explores how participants appropriate different types of games to highlight political uncertainties and distrust in what is portrayed as a game dominated by the authorities. The second theme—the roles and agencies of playful citizens—examines the perceived roles of citizens as both active and passive participants in this game, and how agency is negotiated through civic visuals.

The empirical material presented in this chapter demonstrate how a new form of playful resistance is presented by participants on digital platforms, through the use of visual representations that depict the dynamic relations between authorities and citizens as game participants, simplifying complex political events into a simple game of chess, for instance. The appropriation of different types of games in civic talk enables participants to imagine themselves as players, portraying their relations to other actors in civic society, as members of a team fighting towards the same goal, or as opponents. In other cases, however, participants seem to imagine themselves as mere pawns in a vast game of politics, powerless and ruled by the 'players'. This playful form of civic engagement allows individuals to take on an active role to participate in the imaginative game, by which they openly express their opinions even when the imbalanced power dynamic between them and the authorities is at play in reality.

The chapter is organised into four sections. The first provides background on the concepts of play in civic engagement and 'joyous resistance' (Ng & Chan 2017) in Hong Kong. This allows me to highlight the importance of examining playful online civic engagement and provide a theoretical foreground for the empirical analysis. The second and third sections present findings from the thematic and critical visual analyses, where I identified the two mentioned themes. I explore how the practice of appropriating game and play in civic visuals reflects citizens' perceptions of complex politics; and investigate how these playful metaphors mirror civic understanding of politics as a game as well as their roles and agency within this context. The final section synthesises the findings and develops the discussion. This concluding section underlines the broader implications of playful resistance as a developing form of online civic engagement, drawing connections between the

playful engagement observed in civic visuals and the evolving landscape of civic participation.

## Reimagining the 'game' of politics

By comparing complex political issues with, for instance, a simple game of chess, participants find ways to deconstruct, understand, and critically communicate honest opinions and discontent playfully and importantly, non-confrontationally. The kinds of games that are commonly repurposed to illustrate the game of politics involve different actors. Here, the reasons behind these appropriations are discussed, as well as the policies and controversies represented as game elements. Further, this part of the chapter elaborates on how political events such as elections are represented as a game: with illegitimate designs and ridiculous rules where citizens are 'rewarded' with punishments, even when following the rules; and how sensitive discussions are concealed in puzzles. As McGonigal (2011:311) argues, transforming a real-life political issue into a voluntary challenge within a game can activate greater genuine interest, curiosity, motivation, effort, and optimism than it would otherwise.

As shown by Wirman and Jones (2020) in their research on the Anti-ELAB social movement, playful tactics connect young protesters' interests in digital entertainment with political participation, facilitating their discussions on wearing topics in a more engaging manner and a stronger sense of belonging.

In the present study on civic visuals online, civic talk is increasingly restricted and censored. In general, the games featured in this set of empirical material can be categorized into two types: strategy games and games of chance. The former encompasses a wide range of games, in which players must be strategic to win. They include board games such as mahjong, and chess; puzzles like tic-tac-toe and bricks; word games like Scrabble and crossword; card games like poker; and video games such as *Grand Theft Auto V, Untitled Goose,* and *Pokémon Go*. The latter instead refers to the games in which the winning is more dependent on the player's luck, including spinning wheels and a rainbow coin-toss game popular in Hong Kong's arcades. Specific designs and elements of each game provide unique settings and pre-requisites or metaphors for the visual appropriations, allowing creators to depict various topics and scenarios with distinctive details. Regardless of the kind of game, the visual representations that highlight participants' playfulness remain highly context-specific. In some cases, there are additional contextual clues that allow the audience to recognise individuals or the topic of interest. However, oftentimes the interpretation requires an extensive level of contextualisation, as they can appear to be nothing more than ordinary depictions of board games.

Since these visuals are simplistic and ambiguous regarding their subject matters, they can be interpreted as referring to almost any political issue in Hong Kong. Understanding the message requires a close reading of visual elements, accompanying captions, and comments. Again, such circumstantial information is not always available in the data. This absence may be intentional, as ambiguous and uncontextualized visual content thickens the disguise of the civic visuals as expressions of possibly sensitive political issues.

The following examples present a game of mahjong (see Figure 22 and 23), a popular Chinese table game originating in the 19th century that continues to be enjoyed by people across social classes today (Greene 2016:11; Festa 2016:9). Although mahjong tiles are depicted in both images, their symbolic meaning differ as the analysis reveals that they convey two distinct stories at in two different points in time. But first, as a pivotal point of departure for contextualising both images, mahjong is a culturally significant game in Hong Kong and the broader Chinese context. Typically played by four people at a table using a set of tiles, mahjong is in the literature described as both an intellectual and social activity that promotes social engagement and participation across social groups, including familial, student, and senior communities (Tse et al. 2024:1363; Wang et al. 2019; Levine 2022). Mahjong has withstood time and social reforms, remaining culturally relevant among the Chinese population today (Greene 2016:1). Hence, as Festa notes, mahjong has become integrated into everyday life in contemporary China and serves an important social purpose (2006:9). The social aspect of the game is as important as the game play itself, as Greene stresses that the 'comradeship' established around the mahjong table is often appreciated by the players (2016:8). The game is also known for its diversity, with variations in rules and number of tiles across regions and time (Festa 2006:15). For instance, the 'Hong Kong Mahjong' or 'Cantonese Mahjong' commonly played in Hong Kong includes more tiles compared with the version of 'Popular Mahjong' played in other Chinese regions. Its cultural significance extends beyond gameplay to the craftsmanship of carving mahjong tiles from wood, bamboo, or ivory plates. In 2014, the technique was officially recognised as intangible cultural heritage by the Hong Kong government. Understanding the cultural and social significance of the game for Hongkongers contributes to a more contextualised interpretation of the images.

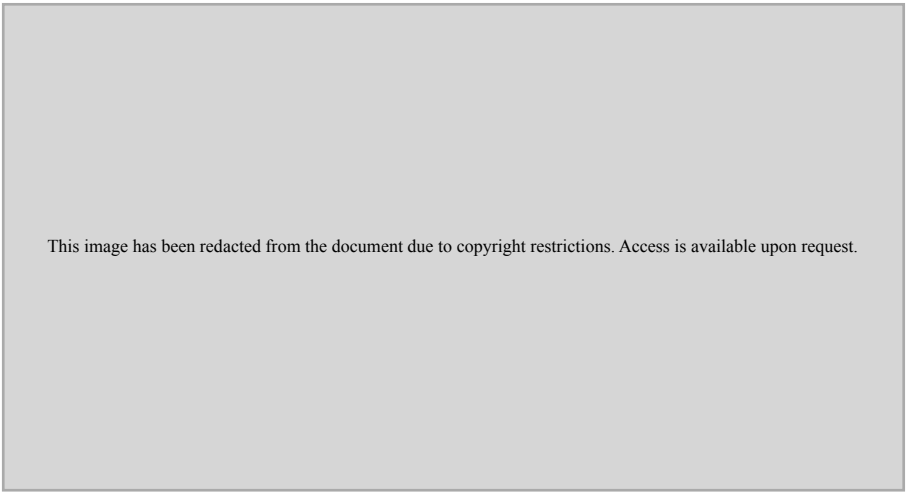



**Figure 22**
An illustration of a set of mahjongs. Source: Instagram.

We now turn to Figure 22. This image was posted on 27 February, 2020, just after local cases and transmissions of the Coronavirus had begun (Lam et al. 2020:53). Concurrently, this year was marked by heightened anti-police sentiment among many Hongkongers. Following the implementation of a more aggressive tactical approach to crowd dispersal (Stott et al. 2020: 832),[16] conflicts between citizens and the police escalated significantly. This contributed to a decline of public confidence in law enforcement, as reported by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute in 2020 (see McCarthy et al. 2023:96). In particular, perceptions of police illegitimacy were amplified on social media, where vengeful sentiments towards the police were often openly expressed.

Exploring a potential disguised symbolism embedded in this image begins with an analysis of the meaning of the tiles in Figure 22— 'thirty thousand' (三萬, *saam-maan*), 'centre' (中, *zung*), and 'ten thousand' (一萬, *jat-maan*). Here, 'thirty thousand' appears to reference the police. This number, indicating the size of the Hong Kong police force, was commonly used in the phrase '30,000 (police) thanks' during the pandemic, as a form of trolling of law enforcement online. Building on the resentment towards the police, this phrase conveyed a provocative message, wishing the entire force to be punished for their actions during the movement by contracting the coronavirus. The phrase was used repeatedly, first appearing on

[16] The excessive use of pepper spray and tear gas by the police against unarmed protesters, both during peaceful demonstrations and once inside a metro station, was highly controversial and raised concerns among the public, rights groups and activists (Hale 2019).

social media platforms when the first positive COVID-19 case was confirmed within the police department. Some individuals commented with this transgressive phrase as a response.

Next to 'thirty thousand' are three tiles that read 'centre'. Although the character *zung* is understood as 'centre' in the context of the game, it carries multiple meanings in vernacular Cantonese. For instance, it can function as a verb to indicate being unexpectedly affected by something, such as 'catching' a cold. Alternatively, it can signify a positive surprise, like 'winning' a prize. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it was also often used to indicate testing positive for the virus, which aligns with the abovementioned interpretation of the previous tile. The combination of 'thirty thousand' and 'centre' tiles can thus be read as a trolling message, with a strong emphasis on the manifestation of 'getting (the virus)' as it dominates this set of tiles. While trolling is an ambiguous practice, it can be understood both as personal entertainment or an attempt to discomfort others (Bishop 2013:302), here potentially with political intent.

Compared with the rest of the tiles, the one on the right appears slightly misaligned. A possible interpretation is that it may not form a winning combination with the others in this round of the game and is likely to be discarded by the player soon. This specific tile, 'ten thousand', can be interpreted if contextualised in relation to the other elements and through news reports from the day of the posting. In news archives from 27 February 2020, the keyword 'ten thousand' is associated with a controversial budget proposed by the government. While it would provide all permanent Hong Kong residents with HK$10,000 in cash, as an initiative to relieve financial burdens associated with the pandemic, it was connected to another budget post of HK$25.8 billion, for the police force to cover crowd control gear and extra personnel (Ho 2020). Pro-democracy politicians criticised the government's intention to bundle the two budgets as a tactic to force lawmakers from opposition parties to pass the budget (InMedia 2020). As the then leader of the Civic Party Alvin Yeung stated to the media, '[the] justice that citizens are striving for cannot be bought by that HK$10,000' (Ho 2020). On Instagram, there were several other posts published on that day, directing the community's attention to the seemingly stringless cash payout scheme. These posts share a similar message: that the hidden cost of receiving the cash reward should not be overlooked when reviewing the budget proposal.

Taken together, a way to interpret Figure 22 is that it could be a layered expression of the artist's response to a series of contentious issues disguised by a simple game of mahjong. More specifically, it highlights that the problems surrounding the budget proposal could be rooted in the conflictual relationship between citizens and the authorities. The budget proposal presents a paradoxical situation where citizens can either receive financial relief and simultaneously grant the police force substantial funding support (and thereby, additional power to control the crowds), or forgo this opportunity for financial support. In this interpretation, the symbolic

meaning of discarding the last mahjong tile is the artist's rejection of the reward and prioritising continuous confrontation with law enforcement, least to say, not shying away from trolling the police. Despite the image's minimalistic composition and primarily playful motif, the mahjong tiles tell a complex and controversial story that underscores the deteriorating relationship between citizens and the authorities that has worsened in the aftermath of the Anti-ELAB Movement. Under these circumstances, the government's incentives to allocate more funds to policing have generated growing tensions between pro-establishment and pro-democracy politicians and appear to have produced a similar effect in the relationship between citizens and the authorities in this case.

Figure 23 depicts another image of a mahjong tile published on 3 July 2020. Known as 'eight dots', this tile consists of eight circles representing old Chinese coins. Compared to Figure 22, I struggled to contextualise this image during the Instagram walkthrough. Nonetheless, given that the artist's other works consistently conveyed disguised political meanings, I decided to include this piece in the sample under the category of playful representations. Here, limited information from the visual and written texts can be used to contextualise the image, as there is no accompanying caption in the social media post. However, there is one comment that vaguely mentions censorship, 'If things continue in this way, even mahjong will be censored soon 🤣'. To understand how the 'eight dots' is related to the discussion of censorship, and why would mahjong be potentially censored, I reviewed the news stories archive to contextualise the story here. One interesting finding is that the government had issued a statement on 2 July, which declared that the ban of protest slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times'.

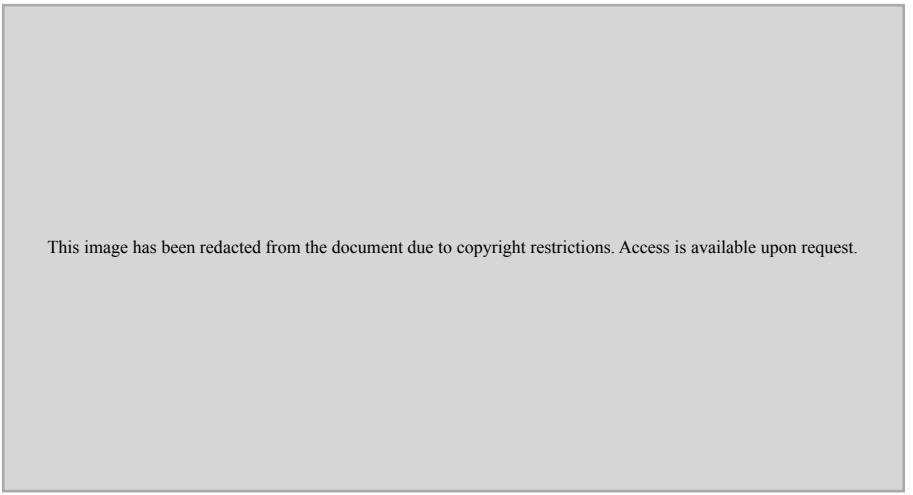



**Figure 23**
An illustration of a mahjjong tile. Source: Instagram.

According to the government, the slogan carries the meaning of 'Hong Kong Independence'. Hence, displaying the slogan was now seen as subverting State power and thus violating the NSL (GOV.HK 2020).The announcement of this has sparked many creative, artistic appropriations of the eight-character slogan. For instance, some artists have created a new visual 'slogan' with various shapes instead of words. By replacing the words with the shapes of, e.g. a circle, a rectangle, and a triangle, people have found a playful way to prolong the use of the slogan without directly violating the NSL.

With the understanding that this breaking news was announced the day before the publication of Figure 23 in mind, it is my interpretation that these eight dots may symbolise the now-prohibited eight-character slogan. In this way, an underlying meaning of the image could point to the artist's critique of the perceived absurdity of the censorship placed on the slogan. Just like other artistic appropriations of the slogan that were circulating on the Internet following the news announcement, this is the artist's playful take on the appropriation. In guise of an innocent mahjong tile, these simple dots can be read as the alternative version of the original slogan, with each dot replacing one of each original character, as well as the artist's imagination of the broader implications for the future of free speech.

Returning to the abovementioned user comment, it appears that this playful approach to mock the censorship holds capacity to invite more playful reactions to this rather upsetting news. The user seems to have made the connection between the mahjong illustration and the censorship as well, as they pointed explicitly to the topic of censorship. They even took it further to underline that the authorities may one day deem these arbitrary representations a threat to national security and impose a censorship on them too. In particular, the laughing emoji at the end of the comment highlights the user's playfully ironic sensibility, which demonstrates that the irony intended by the creator can also be understood by others within the civic community. Here, they share a mutual sense of humour and understanding of the undertone of the visuals. The importance of this shared sense of humour among members of the community will be further elaborated in the following sections.

## Old rules out, new rules in

Among different games, the classic board game *Monopoly* appears to be a popular choice of game appropriation in civic talk on the platform. *Monopoly* centres around themes of real estate trading and financial strategy. To win the game, the player must become the wealthiest by buying, renting, or selling more or less expensive properties. Players need to carefully plan their strategies, manage their finances, and build properties while avoiding landing on spaces owned by other players, in order to avoid paying rent. Hence, an element of luck is involved in the game, as card-picks and dice rolls determine what spaces players land on, impacting the progress

of the game, and whether a player receives monetary rewards or penalties—in some cases, even a trip to jail.

When comparing the visual elements in the empirical material, it appears that the game's featuring of 'jail' and 'police' are key reasons for creators appropriating *Monopoly*. The appropriations seem to reflect real-life issues in a playful manner, often emphasising the presence of the authorities in the game design in a seemingly exaggerated manner. Yet, the magnified presence of authorities and surveillance in these representations may be considered as reflections on the real-life experience of growing surveillance and increasing punishments for political dissent.

In the original game design, there are two stacks of cards: *Chance* and *Community Chest*, representing unpredictable scenarios and benefits respectively. Contrary to the penalty elements, chances and benefits are typically omitted in the appropriated versions portrayed in the empirical material. Instead, these images emphasise the unprecedented power of the authorities. A common theme among these visuals is how they tend to highlight the disproportionate penalties citizens-as-players might face at every turn in the game, alongside the total absence of opportunities and rewards they are supposed to enjoy. Generally, these visuals can be interpreted as depictions of how citizens reimagine Hong Kong politics as a game, set in the background against an authoritarian system where no one is either able to receive fair chances or escapes unreasonable punishment.

One of the more explicit and hence, less ambiguous versions of this is found in Figure 24, which shows an example with the caption: 'A Monopoly with no chances and no social benefits'. The image was published on 20 April 2020, as a response to the massive arrests on 18 April, which targeted 15 pro-democracy lawmakers and activists for organising and participating in two 'unauthorised' protests. This large-scale operation made local news headlines and was dubbed the '418 mass arrests' by pro-democracy activists and media. Since the protests took place before the enactment of the NSL, supporters regarded the prosecutions and charges against the organisers as wrongful and unwarranted, arguing that citizens should have been able to enjoy the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Hence, the example demonstrates how citizens reacted to a serious political event that had a devastating impact on the pan-democracy camp, through an appropriation of *Monopoly*; and how other users understand this appropriation.

In Figure 24, the original design of the boardgame is echoed through several visual elements: the layout of the board and grids, the detoured logo 'MONOPOPO, the inclusion of 'Chance' and 'Community Chest' spaces, the iconic 'GO' symbol in the bottom left; 'Visiting' in the top right, and the police icon captioned 'Go to jail', which dominates the remaining grids on the board.

The striking difference between the original and appropriated versions is how dominant the police icon is—to an extent that suggests that there is only one outcome of playing this game: going to jail. The detoured logo 'MONOPOPO',

featuring a black-and-white figure at the centre, references the term ‘popo’, a widely used derogatory term commonly used in addressing the police in a global context. For the figure, despite sharing similarities in facial features, colour, and gesture with the man in the original logo, this figure carries a few attributes that differentiate it from the original. First, instead of a top hat, this figure is wearing a riot protection helmet, frequently employed by riot police. Second, instead of a cane, the figure is holding a baton-like stick, in a body position that looks like he is ready to attack. These attributes suggest that this is, in fact, a representation of a Hong Kong riot police officer. Portraying the police as the logo of this appropriated version of *Monopoly* indicates their dominant position within the context of this ‘game’.

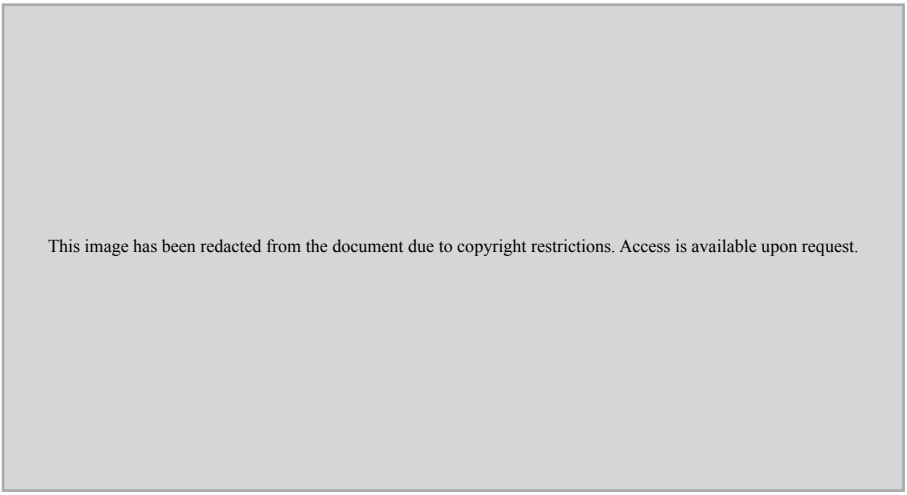



**Figure 24**
An illustration of an appropriated game of *Monopoly*. Source: Instagram.

This interpretation suggests that Hong Kong has become a playground where the powerful player sets rules that are unfair to the others. The visual metaphor of this power play is further strengthened by the overwhelming presence of the jail guard icons and the lonely prisoner tucked away in the corner of the board. From an iconographic perspective, transforming a game that offers chances and benefits to the players, to one that seizes all opportunities and fairness, reflects a sense of citizens’ shock and helplessness following the arrests. The creator depicts a fearful and frustrating society where benefits and opportunities do not exist. Once described as a land of opportunities (Wong & Koo 2016:516), Hong Kong is here depicted as a police state where dissents are jailed, and there is no way players can get out of being punished. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the current state, yet also an imagination of the future of the city, where the game of politics is dominated and

controlled by the authorities, overshadowing every other actor in society, leaving no critical voices to be heard.

Despite the absurdity of this design, not all participants seemed to have perceived this as an overexaggerated depiction of the real-life political situation. On the contrary, their comments show affirmations of the imagined future of the game of politics. Comments such as 'so true…', 'how funny yet pathetic', 'a ruthless and inhumane game', all reflect a sense of unwillingness to participate and their perceived powerless position against authorities under the new game rules and setting. However, the reactions in the comments are not limited to the pessimistic replies. Other members share humorous replies that not only show endorsement of this ironic portrayal, but also a continuation of the list of new features in this game with their imagination:

- 'Hong Kong, set off again—to Stanley!'[17]
- 'A few grids of the death penalty are missing.'
- 'Technically you cannot receive [the reward] if you are going straight into prison again.'
- 'The MTR station is missing.'

Here, several comments refer to the rumours on social media, about the mysterious deaths of protesters during the Anti-ELAB Movement. These rumours were based on the reports of several suicide incidents during the protests, accompanied by conspiracy theories alleging police involvement. Based on the accounts of the unnatural condition of deaths and the absence of suicide notes, these rumours were further fuelled by constant physical confrontations between police and protesters during dispersals (Kwon 2022:6-10). While it remains unproven whether these rumours played a substantial role in triggering contentious actions, the complex relationship between the circulation of these rumours and protest participation should be taken into account when interpreting such engagement in civic talk. These comments demonstrate a distrust towards official sources of information in relation to the mysterious rise in suicide numbers during the social unrest, while showing a shared sense of humour among participants through these kinds of ironic and sometimes gallows-humorous replies. Dark humour, according to humour theorists, 'implores us to engage momentarily with the experience of loss' (Murray 2016:55). Building on this conception, gallows humour should not be understood as superficial engagement (Doona 2024 :76), but rather as a continual effort to articulate the experience of grief and construct meaning from loss (Murray 2016:55).

[17] Stanley refers to the Stanley Prison in Hong Kong.

As Day (2011:40-1) notes, irony works as a communal glue when the ironist (the image creator in this case) and the audience share particular assumptions and cultural cues. A sense of community is not only highlighted through their shared knowledge of the context of this depiction, but also their common appreciation towards the joke or implied meanings of the illustration. Generally, the appropriation of *Monopoly* in Hong Kong's civic visual culture imply that, in this game of politics, old and established rules are no longer applicable to playing the role of a law-abiding citizen, forcing citizens to adapt to drastic changes. While these old rules are no longer in force, new rules are constantly being introduced in this evolving environment. This creates a deep sense of uncertainty and increased distrust towards authorities. As humour scholars emphasise, the use of irony and dark humour in uncertain times can be seen as both a form of solidarity between those who share uncertainty in uncomfortable and unstable situations (Doona 2024:75). In the midst of dealing with uncertainties and processing intimidations, citizens' covert engagement with a serious, intimidating political event through their ironic and humour-intended engagement with civic visuals on Instagram faciliate a sense of community.

Another type of playful civic visual, Figure 25 depicts a censored words crossword puzzle, a poignant graphic commentary on the censorship of a range of politically sensitive phrases in Hong Kong. The image suggests that answers to the crossword puzzle should be revealed, but are obscured by thick black strokes, symbolising censorship. The caption, 'I can't tell you what is censored, because it is censored', underlines the pervasive nature of censorship.

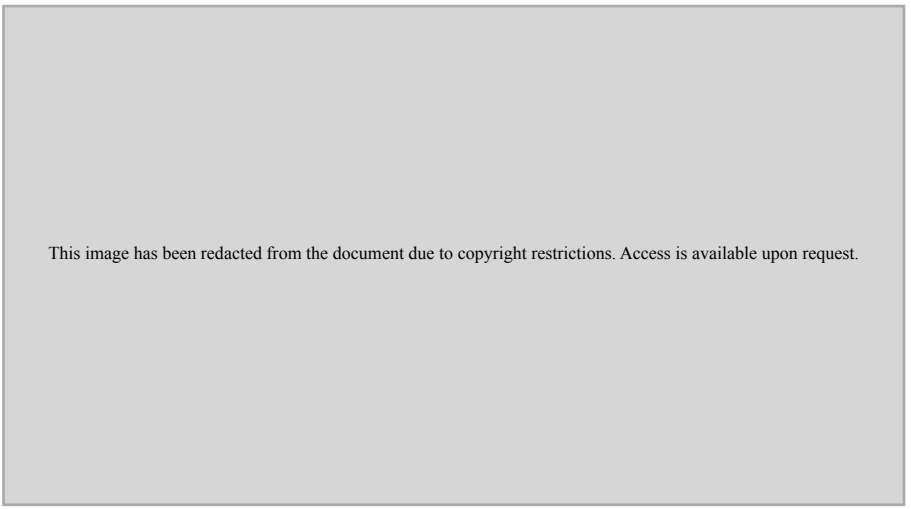



**Figure 25**
An illustration of a censored crossword puzzle. Source: Instagram.

In the aftermath of the NSL, censorship has become increasingly stringent, especially concerning protest slogans that are considered to promote subversion. Since then, the authorities have intensified efforts to prohibit the use of these words and phrases, which have deemed a threat to national security. This crossword puzzle illustrates censorship through a depiction of a familiar game, representing the suppression, where the answers—potentially politically sensitive words—are hidden from view, reflecting the real-world scenario where such words are censored. The use of thick black strokes to cover the answers parallels the government's forceful removal of content that challenges its authority. This visual metaphor highlights the lack of transparency and the extent to which censorship is enforced. Finally, the caption's acknowledgement of censorship can be interpreted as an additional layer of irony and critique to the visual expression, emphasising the absurdity and associated frustration experienced by those who seek to express their views freely.

Further, Figure 26 shows three simple illustrations of the two-player strategy game tic-tac-toe. Posted on 14 December 2019, this carousel post of three games of tic-tac-toe is the creator's response to the perceived lack of fairness in the November District Council Election. While Hong Kong citizens cannot vote for their CE, eligible voters can participate in the District Council Election held every four years. The November 2019 election, being the first since the anti-ELAB movement began, saw around 40,000 new voters register. These newly registered voters included many young citizens, who had been motivated by the pro-democracy movement and were likely to vote for pro-democracy candidates. A month before election day, pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong was disqualified from running. The government cited that his advocacy for 'self-determination' as conflicting with the requirement for candidates to uphold the constitution (Associated Press 2019).

The three images were collected from an Instagram carousel post, each depicting a round of tic-tac-toe. The game's rule is simple: the first player to get three of their marks (either 'X' or 'O') in a row on the 3x3 grid wins. Although the election is not explicitly mentioned, the contextualising visual analysis identifies subtle visual clues hinting at the political event. The two players are represented by blue and yellow, with the former symbolising pro-establishment or anti-protest actors and the latter representing pro-democracy actors and protesters.[18]

[18] Since the Umbrella Movement, pro-establishment actors in Hong Kong are commonly referred to as 'blue ribbons' while pro-democracy protesters are known as the 'yellow ribbons'.

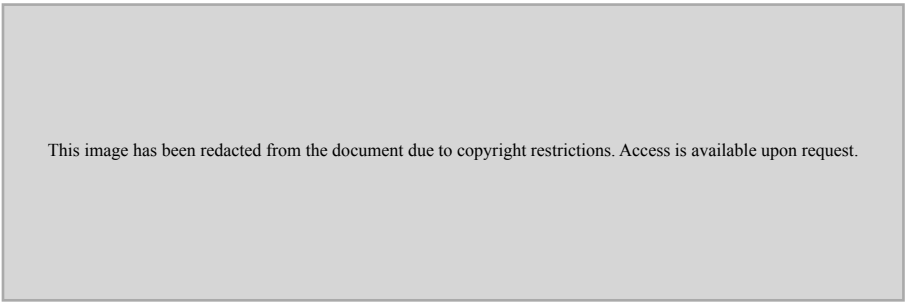



**Figure 26**
Three illustrations of tic-tac-toe in form of a carousel post. Source: Instagram.

In these depictions, the blue player wins the first two rounds and automatically gains victory in the last round, due to the disengagement of the other player.However, upon closer examination, the victories appear to be achieved by disregarding the longstanding game rules and the unexplained disqualification of the opponent. Although the blue player is not playing by the game's rules, there do not seem to be any consequences. Conversely, the yellow player is being robbed of a fair game and eventually disqualified from participating. The details of the colours and the emphasis on breaking established rules parallel with popular opinon on the eventful election: criticising the lack of fairness and the authorities' repression of pro-democracy candidates. On top of being a critical response to the recent election, I interpret this series of images, similar to the *Monopoly* appropriation mentioned above, as an imagination of the gameplay of future elections in Hong Kong, characterised by less established rules and more ambiguities in a candidate's eligibility.

## Rewarding elements

In Bouko's (2024:62) discussions on the power of play and creative metaphors in participatory online culture, she builds on Huizinga's argument that creativity and art are based on different forms of play. Drawing from this perspective, she underlines that creative modes to engage with political expressions on social media is also based on play (Bouko 2024:62). Regardless, there is always an element of tension in play (Huizinga 1949:11). According to Huizinga, tension plays a crucial role in creating a sense of uncertainty and 'chanciness', encouraging the player to take a risk in order to win or achieve success. Competition highlights tension, particularly with the elements of rewards and punishments. Rewarding elements are specifically important constituents of play, as Eberle (2014:223) suggests, which explains why it is a ubiquitous activity across cultures (Bouko 2024:63). Rewards facilitate and motivate play, as they are typically understood as something desirable that players are willing to take a risk for. They can take a material form, like trophies, ribbons, badges, or other prizes; or an immaterial form such as a feeling of pleasure

or a sense of freedom. Regardless of the form, gaining rewards is usually seen as a positive consequence of participation: an incentive that invites people to take part in the game. However, the findings from the analysis of playful civic visuals suggest a more nuanced way of representing political incentives and govenrnment policies as rewards.

To examine the rewarding elements displayed in the empirical material in-depth, I developed two sub-categories of 'rewards' and 'punishments' in the thematic analysis. Coding the images under these two sub-categories allowed me to identify 1) what citizens imagine they can gain when obeying or challenging the government; 2) what they have to sacrifice in doing so. Upon coding and revising the codes, I realised that there is a dynamic relation between the representations of rewards and punishments.

In these images, while certain elements—such as votes or 'freedom'— are clearly framed as prizes. Yet, less desirable or outright negative consequences are also positioned alongside these sought-after items. This juxtaposition generates ambiguity, prompting viewers to wonder whether these elements are intended as rewards or punishments. To account for this ambivalence in how 'rewarding' elements are represented in the civic visuals, I added a third sub-category, 'arbitrary rewards', when conducting the thematic analysis. Arguably, artists highlight this ambivalence to show that the rewards given to obedient citizens by the authorities are not always desirable, depending on their values and political stances. As I will show in the following discussion, sometimes these rewards are rather illusory, presented to make citizens believe they are benefiting from certain policies or rules while they are actually being taken advantage of. This ambivalence amplifies the uncertainties perceived in the imagined game of politics, suggesting that citizens can never be sure what kind of consequences they are facing when participating in the civic society.

During the pandemic, COVID-19 vaccination was a contentious topic in Hong Kong. Scepticism and criticism arose around the government-supplied Chinese-made vaccines in relation to their effectiveness and the lack of transparency in the vaccine programme (Vines 2021b). At the same time, tension rose between unvaccinated citizens and authorities as restrictions on the former tightened. To encourage vaccination, both public and private sectors offered a range of incentives, including lucky draws with prizes such as vouchers, cash coupons, free hotel stays, luxury watches, and even a new apartment. Although these incentives initially seemed to boost vaccination rates, the combination of strong anti-government sentiment and media reports on the side effects led to significant distrust towards the government and the vaccines. According to research on governmental incentives to promote COVID-19 vaccination in Hong Kong, over 86% of respondents perceived the incentives as having almost no effect on their motivation to receive the COVID-19 vaccination (Wang et al . 2022:732).

Figure 27 shows an example of how critical opinions on the vaccination incentives are represented in civic visuals. Here, the creator appropriates and remixes the games of spinning wheel and darts. On the spinning wheel, which typically consists of wedges that display either prizes or punishments, government and private sector vaccination incentives are displayed alongside commonly perceived vaccine side effects. While two syringes have landed on 'paid one-day vacation' (有薪假一天), there is also a hand holding a third syringe, about to be thrown as a dart as the wheel continues to spin. Using the logic of the design of a game of spinning wheel, this civic visual portrays the COVID-19 vaccination programme in Hong Kong as a game that is mostly determined by luck and randomness. This game design has an emphasis on the uncertainty of whether a player will receive a reward (one of the incentives) or a loss (perceived side effects). Furthermore, an element of darts is appropriated in this scenario, in which the three syringes could be read as the initial and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccines. While three syringes could symbolise three opportunities in the context of common dart games, they can also be interpreted as three consecutive risks from the viewpoint of a vaccine (or government) sceptic. To critically interpret this playful depiction of the public's perception and evaluation of the incentives, I began by contextualising the risks and benefits identified in this representation, in each field of the spinning wheel. Table 5 summarises them with individual remarks.

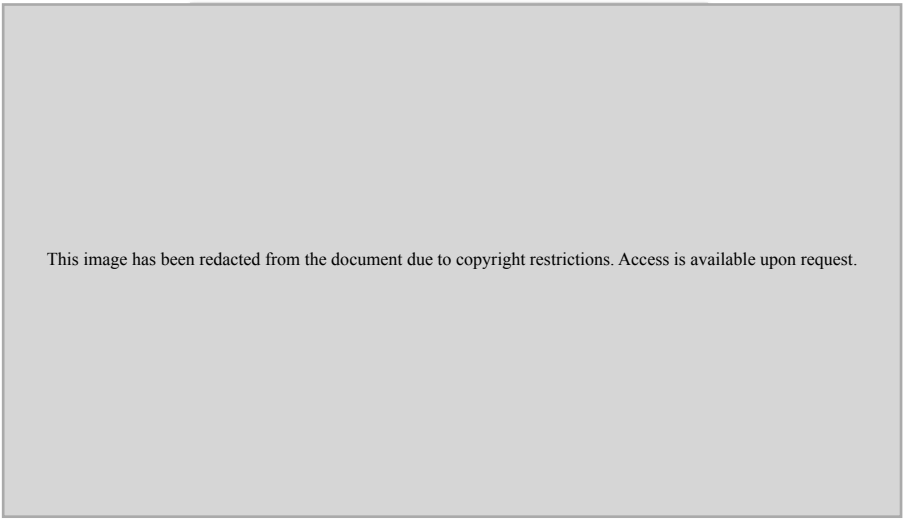



**Figure 27**
An illustration of a spinning wheel with three syringes as darts. Source: Instagram.

The table contextualises and categorises the different incentives for vaccination into 1) rewards; 2) risks; and 3) arbitrary rewards. While some incentives, like free flight tickets and paid vacations, are typically seen as rewards, they are immediately outweighed by risks that involve severe health concerns, leaving an underwhelming impression. Online comments reflect this sentiment, with participants finding the incentives senseless and absurd. For example, one user jokes, 'The one day of paid vacation is too short for dealing with the (after-death) affairs!' Others commented, 'The trip to heaven is the grand prize and should be placed in the large field', and 'Is there only one destination (heaven) for the free flight?' These comments highlight the imbalance between risks and benefits, showing that some citizens remain unmotivated and unwilling to participate despite the incentives.

**Table 5.**
Summary of risks and benefits of vaccination depcited in Figure 27.

| Risks/ Benefits | Remarks |
|---|---|
| Free flight ticket | Airport authority launched a flight ticket lucky draw to promote vaccination |
| Bell's palsy (facial paralysis) | A reported side effect of the SinoVac vaccinations[19] |
| A vote in the LegCo election | During the 2021 LegCo election, it was suggested that only vaccinated voters would be allowed to enter the voting. This requirement was ultimately not enforced |
| Trip to heaven | Based on media reports on suspected death following SinoVac vaccinations |
| One day of paid vacation | The government and other public institutions offered a vaccination leave to their employees |
| Free apartment | A lucky draw for a free apartment launched by a private foundation |
| Paper-made apartment | A mockery of the free apartment lucky draw, as paper-made houses are typically offered as offerings for the dead |
| Cash voucher for blue' (pro-establishment) shops | Private businesses offered cash vouchers for lucky draws, many of them are thus regarded as pro-establishment businesses and are categorised as blue shops |
| A 10-day trip to mainland China | Vaccine passports that allow cross-border travel to mainland China |

[19] Official report indicates adverse events following immunisation include 627 reports of suspected Bell's palsy and 120 reports of deaths following COVID-19 vaccinations. While the report identifies Bell's palsy as a potential side effect of the vaccine, it clarifies that the deaths have no causal relationship with the COVID-19 vaccination (Centre for Health Protection 2023).

Additionally, some incentives appear more ambivalent. These arbitrary incentives can be regarded as desirable by some and undesirable by others. For instance, cash vouchers might appeal to consumers who have no problem supporting pro-establishment 'blue' businesses, while pro-democracy protesters might disregard them, preferring to boycott these businesses. Similarly, a trip to mainland China without quarantine could be a great incentive for frequent travellers, but for those who rarely travel across the border due to political or personal reasons, it is less appealing. I interpret these representations of arbitrary rewards as a way to underscore the differences between communities formed during previous political events. In this particular context, considering the posting account and its followers, displaying the unwanted 'rewards' on the spinning wheel emphasises the varying values between different communities, distinguishing those who reject the incentives from those who are driven by them.

In the broader context of civic engagement in Hong Kong, this playful engagement with the vaccination programme highlights some citizens' distrust in authorities and their policies. This distrust is evident in the public's disengagement and even rejection of incentives intended to motivate and benefit them, and when these incentives are not aligning with the citizens' values, backlash and resistance will be inevitable. An appropriate level of trust is a key foundation for civic engagement (Dalgren 2003:166). For Dahlgren, insufficient trust hinders engagement while excessive trust may constrain conflict and reinforce oppressive relations (Dahlgren 2009), therefore, a continuous balance of trust and distrust is the most beneficial for civic agency (Doona 2024:79).

In Hong Kong, citizens' responses to public health initiatives were heavily influenced by the mistrust of authorities as a result of the protests and movement. As studies show, only 34.4% of Hongkongers were vaccinated four months into the vaccination programme (Tsang 2022:1). While some studies suggest that citizens with non-establishment political views might have a higher rate of COVID-19 vaccine refusal compared to pro-establishment citizens, it is evident that perceived vaccine efficacy and safety are prioritised over political views when understanding vaccine hesitancy in Hong Kong (Tsang 2022:4; Lun et al. 2023:5-8). According to the study, the most trusted sources of health information in Hong Kong are health care practitioners, compared to other sources such as government health authorities and traditional media. Here, Lun et al. (2023:9) underline that the low vaccination rate among health care practitioners themselves during the initial rollout potentially led to vaccine misconceptions in Hong Kong. To rebuild public trust and bridge the gap between government policies and public values, authorities need to ensure transparency in decision-making processes and communicate that to the public effectively.

Importantly, a lack of trust between citizens should not be overlooked in this discussion on the overlapping issues of vaccination and civic engagement. Polarised vaccine information on social media strengthened polarisation of beliefs

surrounding state-mandated vaccines *between* citizens, with oppositing stances towards the COVID-19 vaccines in Hong Kong (Leung et al. 2024:227). In alignment with these discussions on vaccine hesitancy and polarisation of beliefs surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines, Figure 27 encapsulates entrenched scepticism towards the vaccine programme, fuelled by polarised political values, beliefs, and trust in the government. It can be understood as a representation that underscores how the lack of trust between citizens and authorities, and among citizens themselves, leads to significant challenges in finding common ground in public policymaking, making it more difficult to facilitate collective actions in civic participation. Trust is the foundation of knowledge for a community, as communal knowledge is generated, sustained, and disseminated based on trust among members (Goldman 1999:4). Particularly in the context of vaccine hesitancy, there is an essential community aspect of knowledge that citizens sought for, which scientific knowledge provided by medical experts cannot be primarily accounted for (Miegel 2024:36; Hausman 2019). As Miegel (2024:46) describes, vaccination campaigns can bring about intensive civic engagement on the internet and, thus, unintended democratic consequences in relation to communities' disbeliefs in the vaccines. When citizens become more actively engaged in discussing the vaccination campaigns with their own interpretations of the reality, traditional authorities are being increasingly challenged (Miegel 2024:47).

## The roles and agency of playful citizens

After exploring how citizens reimagine the game of politics through appropriating play and engagement with visual metaphors of various civic issues, I will now discuss the second theme under this evoling form of engagement online—the civic roles and civic agency as reflected in the practices and representations of playful civic engagement on social media.

I argue that playful engagement in civic visuals, in forms of production and interaction with illustrations on social media, can be seen as an alternative mode of civic participation in the digital age. Here, it is worth turning to the work of meme scholars as they continue to study internet memes as 'playful appropriations of contexts that occur at the intersection of the political and the humorous' as part of participatory digital culture (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021:2368-9). The conception of memes as modes of expression and public discussion adopted by individuals who seek engaging ways to take part in political discussions on online platforms (Shifman 2014:123) mirrors a significant part of my conceptualisation of civic visuals as a form of political participation. Moreover, the analysis of the category of playful civic visuals further underlines humour as a core element in some of these images. As memes are often described as creative and humorous expressions in digital culture (Shifman 2014:78; Knobel & Lankshear 2007; Merrill & Lindgren

2021:2405), I argue that sense of humour is another common quality that is shared between memes and civic visuals creators and audiences. Importantly, there are some key differences between memes and the civic visuals I study, which will be discussed in the conclusions.

For Dahlgren (2013:68), when examining alternative modes of political participation that involve more dynamic and less established practices, it is important not to overlook the contingencies in civic identities and practices, and understand that actions are always shaped by contexts. In a constantly evolving environment, identities shift, and new practices are adapted in response to changing circumstances. Drawing on concepts like the ludification of culture and the ludification of identity and self, Glas and colleagues propose to approach the study of civic engagement through the lens of play (2019:10), inviting discussion on how citizenship can be understood, analysed and conceptualised in relation to media and play (Jones 2013). The notion of playful citizenship prompts us to rethink citizenship when people 'have become more playful as citizens' (Glas et al. 2019:10). Under this circumstance, studying the relationship between media and citizenship requires looking at civic engagement beyond information and communication media, but more importantly, with attention to the imaginative, creative, and affective dimensions of the evolving practices (Glas et al. 2019:12-3).

## The active and passive roles of citizens

To identify the roles of pro-democracy citizens in the imagined game of politics, I began with inductive coding of the visual representations to establish categories of roles based on the visual and textual depictions of game content and individuals. This process identified a prominent and a secondary role: active players and spectators. Eberle (2014:214) suggests that play can be vicarious or engaging, depending on whether the participant takes an active role—as the player—or a passive role—as the spectator. This dynamic helps unpack the findings of the thematic analysis, where citizens are portrayed as engaged in both active and passive roles in the playful imagination of political scenarios.As active players, citizens are depicted as directly engaging in civic or political activities such as voting and protesting. As spectators, citizens are more indirectly engaged, observing political development without direct participation. They are not depicted alongside other political actors but can be imagined as viewers or witnesses, watching the unfolding of political events from outside the frame.

Figure 28 shows an example of how participants are imagined as active players in the material. In this image, a man who is somewhat distressed-looking is playing darts. Instead of using a traditional dartboard, the player aims his darts at a poster on the wall. This poster, resembling a voting ballot, contains several simple elements: a heading 'Election vote 2nd May'; pictures of two—one in yellow and the other one in blue; two bodies of text next to the pictures; and two circles next to

the text. The election referred to here is the LegCo that was supposed to take place at the end of 2020 (it was later postponed to 2021 due to the pandemic, which evoked critical opinions from pro-democracy voters. Therefore, the date displayed on the poster does not refer to the election date but to the last day for eligible citizens to register as voters. While the player is aiming for his second shot, one dart has already landed on the first circle, symbolising a vote for the yellow (pro-democracy) candidate. On the floor, there is a yellow mark indicating a 1.5-meter distance between the throw line and the dartboard. Like many civic visuals presented in this thesis, this one was shared during the pandemic when a social distancing rule requiring a 1.5-meter distance was in effect.

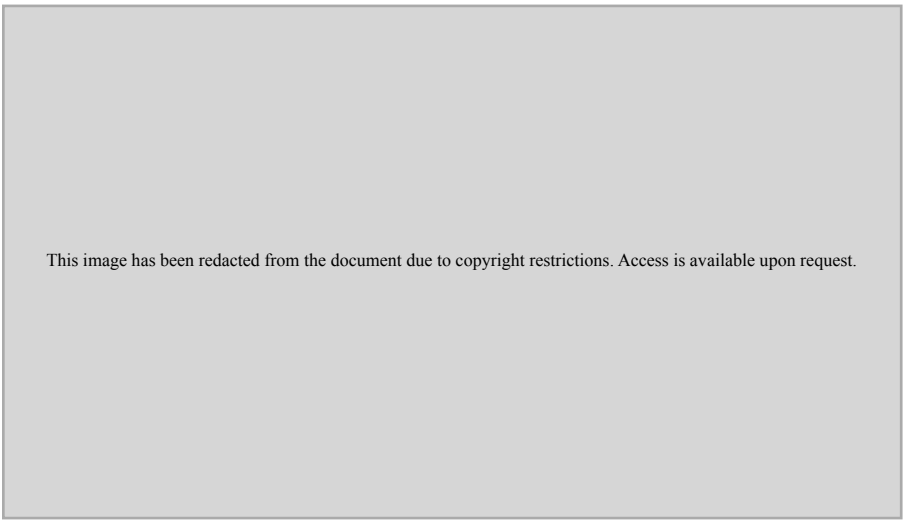



**Figure 28**
An illustration of an individual playing a game of darts. Source: Instagram

In humorous contexts, visual cues are sometimes significant, and sometimes not. In some scenarios, shared references are merely depicted to create a sense of commonality or recognition among viewers (Day 2011:147). Here, I interpret the distance as a reference to pandemic restrictions in that specific temporal context, as this depicted distancing rule does not resemble the specific rules at a voting station. Hence, the player could be understood as trying or wanting to vote with the pro-democracy movement but being restricted from doing so. Alongside the image is the caption ‘Register! Register! Register!’ My interpretation of its meaning highlights a sense of urgency in the short yet important message: eligible citizens should register as voters for the upcoming election to secure seats for the pan-democratic lawmakers in the LegCo. Before this election, pro-democracy activists and pan-democratic candidates have continuously devised strategies, coordinated

the fielding of candidates, and mobilised citizens to turnout to vote in support of the movement in the district council election in 2019 (Shum 2021:249). Similar efforts were mobilised in the 2021 LegCo election. As scholars have noted, the Anti-ELAB Movement reframed the electoral arena into 'a ground for protest', transforming the act of voting into a form of contentious action (Shum 2021:249). Altogether, Figure 28 can be interpreted as a desperate call for action, intended to mobilise pro-democracy citizens to register within the electoral system and cast their votes on candidates who can represent their voices in the LegCo.

In other scenarios, citizens are depicted as playing against a powerful opponent in the game of politics. These illustrations often highlight a significant power asymmetry between citizens and their imagined opponents, with citizens typically positioned at a disadvantage. Figure 29 portrays the power struggle between the state and citizens through a visual metaphor of a Chinese chess match. The first identifiable player is Winnie the Pooh, recognisable by his iconic red shirt and round yellow body. As discussed in Chapter 6, the association between the cartoon character and the Chinese leader has already been established within internet meme culture. Here, however, Pooh's close connection to the CCP is further reinforced by the small communist emblem on his shirt—the hammer and sickle. His cross-armed posture conveys a heightened level of concentration directed towards the chess game positioned in front of him. On the chessboard, several pieces are arranged. Right in front of Pooh are pieces marked with white letters, eleven of which are labelled with the names of high-ranking government officials in Hong Kong. Two other pieces are marked as 'police', and one marked as 'black'—a term associated with triads,[20] commonly referred to as 'black societies' in the local vernacular. While the opposing player is not explicitly depicted, they are symbolically represented by the black chess pieces labelled 'Hong Kong people' positioned at the centre of the board. In these circumstances, the two black pieces are clearly outnumbered, signalling the ambush faced by the people of Hong Kong.

In this game of chess, the chess pieces symbolise the power held by the players: the Chinese government and the people of Hong Kong. While the state has a handful of pieces to deploy—including the local government and police, who were accused of being in cahoots with the triads during several protests—the citizens are at a disadvantage, with limited resources and an urgent need for support. This metaphor can be read as a depiction of the stark power imbalance between pro-democracy

[20] According to a study on the roles of the Hong Kong triads during the Umbrella Movement, contemporary triads are less organised criminal groups but more loosely structured entities that exploit business opportunities in China (Varese & Wong 2018:28). Based on interviews with informants, including triad members, the scholars underline how low-level triad members were mobilised by powerful business interests connected to the authorities to attack protesters at demonstration sites (ibid.:35). The study argues that a new role for local triads in post-colonial Hong Kong has emerged, in which the Hong Kong triads have become an 'extra-legal vehicle to enforce unpopular policies and repress social movement' (ibid.).

citizens and their imagined opponent—a formidable force supported by local authorities and law enforcement, ultimately controlled by the Beijing government.

Regardless of the strength or weakness of their opponents in this metaphorical game of politics, citizens consistently exhibit some form of resistance in the visuals. Even when they are at a disadvantage, their presence as active players in these portrayals underlines continuous engagement during a time marked by uncertainties in politics. Although citizens may find themselves cornered and temporarily made passive, they are bearing witness to the political and social development—even through art (Lindroos & Möller 2017:33). While this might be understood as passive as indicated above, witnessing does imply a refusal to look away and a a means of constructing memories that can potentially be presented via different forms of communication. Drawing parallels to strategy games like chess, achieving democracy—winning the game—requires not only exceptional skills and tactics but also qualities like patience and endurance. Hence, action is relative to context and shifting rules of the game; witnessing and maintaining community become key activities in periods of abeyence and growing restrictions of civic participation. Through whatever available means, it is through the active engagement of citizens that democracy derives its legitimacy and vitality (Dahlgren 2009:12).


**Figure 29**
An illustration of a game of chess. Source: instagram

While exploring these playful expressions, I observe a broad range of contentious topics being addressed and facilitated by the playful nature of this form of engagement. Play serves as an element in community building within social movements (Shepard 2011:9), acting as a cultural tool that enhances flexibility in civic talk. By bonding over shared values, references, and humour, citizens engaging in playful resistance are likely to find more joy in their political participation compared to non-playful forms. They confidently display their civic agency, openly discussing topics that might be too sensitive for other public forums or forms. More importantly, perhaps, through playful expressions, these civic visuals are evoking necessary discussions that are otherwise restricted from being explicitly mentioned.

Before Bakhtin introduced his conceptualisation of the carnivalesque for analysing humorous expressions (Bakhtin 1968), Huizinga (1949:8) also described play as a departure from everyday life into a unique, temporary realm of activity in a similar vein. Here, I follow these thinkers in analysing these expressions as they are situated in a separate realm of reality that temporarily suspends viewers from all hierarchical ranks, norms, and prohibitions (Bakhtin 1968:10). Play is normally interpreted as only pretend; it does not hinder engagement that can lead to a state of rapture, temporarily eliminating troublesome feelings. At the same time, it allows people to respond to politics in ironic or humorous ways. While participating in democracy does not normally involve stepping out of one's reality (Dahlgren 2009:149), these playful civic visuals represent engagement for those who share a similar sense of humour and enjoy discussing burdensome topics through humorous ambiguity. From this perspective, civic visuals can be understood as a space that is distanced but not completely detached from the reality of civic talk, a playful space for citizens to temporarily engage in civic talk in ways that are less earnest. As suggested by Hutcheon's theory of irony, this distance created by irony could result in non-commitment and disengagement (Hutcheon 1994:49). However, distancing could also lead to a new perspective, allowing people to see things differently when they are shown in other ways (ibid.). As an emerging space for communicating political opinions, engagement with ironic and satirical civic visuals is contextual and dependent on users' familiarity, ability, and willingness to engage (Bruhn & Doona 2022:285; Doona 2021; Jones 2013). Within this space, people tend to seek a sense of community over the intentions of communicating political opinions with other members (Doona 2024:75), indicating that the building of connections among like-minded individuals within such spaces is not only based on shared political views but more importantly, a shared sense of humour. In other words, playful approaches to civic visuals in addressing are less oriented towards constructing or sustaining earnest civic participation. Rather, these playful expressions of political opinions are more about lowering the threshold of engagement (Bruhn & Doona 2022:287), and establishing familiarity and trust between members of a community.

In the case of post-NSL Hong Kong, where the government is granted the legal mechanism to censor speech and activities deemed as threats to national security, citizens must comply with and are legally restricted from using certain words and phrases, including protest slogans and songs. Although not all words can be censored, the law's nuances blur the line between what is legal and illegal. While social media platforms are increasingly monitored and the uncertainty of surveillance intensifies, some citizens fear legal repercussions so much that they refrain from expressing any political opinions altogether. Others adapt strategically, playing by the rules and continuously testing boundaries. As environments and circumstances change, new practices emerge. This is evident in digital media contexts, as research has shown how individuals modify their existing practices or adopt new ones depending on their platformed networks. For instance, in the American context, communication scholars have discussed how individuals of marginalised groups who perceive a risk in publicly expressing political opinions might turn to political engagement within networks between selective audiences (Van Duyn 2018). Here, secret political organisations are established among individuals who prefer to express dissenting opinions within trusted communities, rather than in broader networks, or silencing themselves entirely (Van Duyn 2018:980). In Hong Kong, Mak et al. (2024:1989) argue that Facebook users who express defiant opinions against the government are likely to adjust their privacy settings to stay engaged in political discussions while ensuring their own safety. Other research also suggests that even before the contemporary level of repression, politically engaged youth in Hong Kong commonly restrict the visibility of their social media posts as a proactive strategy to avoid conflict within heterogeneous networks (Chu & Yeo 2019). While engagement can be sustained in this way to some extent, there is a constant negotiation between the visibility and obscurity of user engagement for these individuals (Baym & boyd 2012; Mak et al. 2024:1989).

Figure 30 shows a mobile puzzle game that is often described as 'Guess the Emoji'. Seemingly designed as a screenshot of the game, this civic visual prompt active participation from its viewers as it depicts an unsolved puzzle. The emojis that are typically understood as representations of 'cheese', 'France', and 'rice' presented as hints to the answer of the puzzle. In the bottom half of the image, there are a variety of Chinese characters listed as potential answers. The blanks in the middle of the image, as I interpret them, serves as an invitation that encourage viewers to take an active role in solving the puzzle. Ironically, accompanying the visual is a written caption that reads, 'Do not randomly put together the words! Please, really! 🫠' Here, the textual and visual clues appear to be contradicting against each other. While the image communicates a sense of play that invites participation, the caption seems to be making a opposite point, calling for more in-depth reading of the irony at play here.

The caption, on one hand, can be interpreted as a cautionary note, which signals that anyone who is committed to solving the puzzle must be aware of potential

consequences. What kind of consequences is being referred to, however, is not explicitly mentioned in the written caption. While the caption is seemingly swaying people away from participating, the only way to understand what is at stake here is through solving the puzzle. In this interpretation, the caption underlines a subtle tension that lies within participation. On the other hand, the giggling emoji at the end of the text suggests a layer of sarcasm, indicating that the warning might not entirely be serious. To understand these contradicting texts and subtexts, viewers must solve the puzzle. It is also by solving the puzzle, players can gain a sense of fulfilment or satisfaction that is facilitated by participating in activities that are achievable (Doona 2016:137). Consequently, one may also gain a sense of being part of the in-group, for their achievement in decoding the texts and understanding the irony and humour associated with this kind of engagement.

Although there appears to be numerous possible combinations, the puzzle itself is not overly complex. Players are invited to use their creativity and the provided hints, to decode the emojis and uncover the hidden text, transforming the experience into an engaging and thought-provoking activity. Table 6 shows my process of decoding the emojis and the revealing of the underlying message.


**Figure 30**
An illustration of a mobile game of 'Guess the Emoji'. Source: Instagram.

By matching the emojis with the list of provided words, it becomes clear that ‘cheese—France—rice—France’ refers to the Chinese proverb ‘知法犯法’, which translates to ‘knowingly violate the law’. This proverb is typically used to describe situations where legal experts or law enforcement officers deliberately commit crimes, which is considered a more severe offense than breaking the law unknowingly. During protests, the proverb was frequently chanted by protesters accusing police officers of abuses of power, particularly in relation to allegations of police brutality. The chant served as an indictment of the perceived misconduct within the authorities.

**Table 6.**
A step-by-step process of decoding the emojis.

| Emojis and their meanings | Cantonese homophones (other meanings) |
|---|---|
| Cheese芝士 zi1 | 知 zi3 (to know) |
| France 法國 faat3 | 法 faat3 (the law) |
| Rice 飯 faan6 | 犯 faan6 (to violate) |
| France 法國 faat3 | 法 faat3 (the law) |
| | **To knowingly violate the law** |

On 2 February 2021, the then commissioner of police held a press conference to review police work in 2020, where he revealed that 45 police officers had been arrested for various crimes during the year. While addressing this issue, he made a significant verbal slip, stating, ‘As a police officer, it is even more necessary to knowingly break the law (知法犯法)’, when he intended to say ‘知法守法’(zi faat sau faat), meaning ‘to know the law and abide by it’. This blunder was quickly picked up by the media and widely shared. Social media users responded with sarcastic comments, highlighting the irony of the situation. Under a Facebook post of the video shared by the online news outlet Inmediahk.net, people left comments such as ‘His first time being so honest’, ‘Appreciate the honesty!’, ‘We get that’, ‘Everyone knows, just did not expect them to confirm it personally’. The incident underlines the tension between the public and the police, amplifying the protesters’ accusations and further weakening trust in law enforcement. The sarcastic reactions from social media users reflected deep-rooted frustration and cynicism towards the police, intensified by the commissioner’s inadvertent remark.

This illustration is evidently another response to the incident, as it was posted just three days after the press conference. The answer to the puzzle ‘to knowingly violate the law’ can be interpreted as a serious accusation directed at the police force. In the

context of post-NSL Hong Kong, openly chanting such accusations in public could lead to legal consequences. However, this metaphorical representation of a word guessing game or rebus provides a creative and playful way for citizens to engage in discussions about police misconduct. By using emojis and a word puzzle format, citizens address and engage with the contentious issue without explicitly spelling out the details and accusations. This seemingly harmless yet playful approach encourages creative expression in sustaining civic talk, while highlighting the tension between the desire to speak out against injustice and the need to navigate the constraints imposed by the law. In this interpretation, this form of playful resistance reflects the resilience and ingenuity of the citizens in finding ways to voice their concerns and hold authorities accountable, even in an increasingly repressive environment.

# Discussion

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates how the playful form of resistance in Hong Kong has evolved from the early notion of joyous resistance, in which participants integrate musical and theatrical performances and entertainment into their contentious actions on the streets, to the appropriation of game designs and use of game metaphors in civic visuals when collective public actions are no longer feasible. The findings in this chapter show that the cultural and political knowledge shared within the community allow members to interpret the political clues in a cultural representation of a game. The significance of a shared sense of humour among participants is highlighted by the analysis of the interactions between participants, who can interpret the irony depicted in 'unserious' depictions of civic issues. However, as scholars in humour studies continuously emphasise, it is important to take humour and satire seriously when analysing engagement in civic talk (Bruhn & Doona 2022:287).

Here, play is both productive and a key constituent of civic society and citizenship, allowing people to explore an imagination of reality and civic society (Huizinga 1949:4). Using games as metaphors for how politics is 'played' and controlled by those in power also allows space for participants to challenge and criticise the existing power structure, which is often depicted by ridiculing the existing power structure characterised by unfairness and groundless rules. The distrust in authorities in real life is further reflected in the frustrations triggered by rigged or unwinnable games and punishments that participants endure. When political intentions are disguised by the playful elements and representations, it could be understood as part of the process of how citizens in Hong Kong navigate new circumstances by distancing themselves from intense, earnest forms civil resistance temporarily. Here, similar to other practices of civil resistance—sustained nonviolent actions used by civilians against various forms of oppression (Schock 2013:277). Citizens

are engaging with civic visuals to express resistance to injustice on the internet—only with wit and humour. In a network society marked by extensive state surveillance (Castells 2023:944), the emergence of civic visuals is understood here as a space for pro-democracy citizens to participate in public controversy while temporarily distancing themselves from earnest engagement.

Critics might argue that playful practices are only a form of 'activist delusion', which is a mere sense of being part of the action when in fact the participant is not even protesting on the streets (Gerbaudo 2012:2). However, Hind suggests that it is important for citizens to choose the most appropriate tool for them in their engagement (2019:304). Different tools are to be adopted by different citizens, based on the different socio-cultural and temporal contexts they are situated in. Playful and satirical expressions have always been prominent in protest culture, which has been amplified in digital culture, with memes and parodies often being used to express political opinions and feelings. My analysis of the civic visuals presented in this chapter confirms what previous studies on playful protests and engagement have argued, that play has become an indispensable element for constructing a civic society and citizenship in the digital age (Glas et al. 2019:19). Rather than dismissing play and seemingly silly expressions in studying civic engagement in Hong Kong, my analysis further confirms that play constitutes to inviting participation in political discourse beyond anglophone contexts (Bruhn & Doona 2022:285-96).

With growing challenges to established and developing democracies in today's world, or what Castells describes as a time of 'new, global darkness' (2023:945), I argue that these subtle and playful engagement with civic visuals should neither be taken for granted nor overlooked when constructing our knowledge about how people under various forms of oppression or injustice defend their identities and values. Although such engagement may not directly translate into concrete civic actions (Doona 2024:75), it could have a lasting effect by reinforcing trust among citizens who share similar social and democratic ideals. Furthermore, analysing civic visuals through the lens of humour research reveals the complexities of citizens' trust and distrust in both their communities and authorities as expressed through playful expressions. From this perspective, engagement with civic visuals plays a role in strengthening social bonds amid vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity (Doona 2024:81), both during the pandemic and in post-NSL Hong Kong.

# 9. Conclusions

This thesis has investigated a new form of civic engagement on social media in post-NSL Hong Kong. I began this enquiry into this subtle form of civic engagement with a curiosity to understand the meaning of political discussions that, on one hand, are shared on social media but, on the other, do not aim to attract too much attention. The findings contribute to the scholarly discussions on latent forms of civic engagement as well as visual protest culture in digital spaces, particularly in a non-Western context that demonstrates new perspectives and possibilities. This chapter concludes this examination and conceptualisation of civic visuals with a discussion of key findings. The main conclusion reached from the analysis is that, while civic visuals can be seen as an alternative, artistic form of political expressions without strategic intended outcomes, this form of participation in discussions around public controversies may have a positive social influence on the communities that engage in them, especially those who are continuously seeking ways to uphold their democratic values as a collective amidst asymmetric conflicts with oppressive power. Finally, this chapter ends with a reflection of the limitations of the study and how future research on civic visuals may develop from here.

## Summary of research

The conceptualisation and contextualisation of civic visuals in this present study depart from the notion of civic talk developed by political scientists and media scholars, who have long examined this fundamental act of civic participation. These perspectives see civic talk as an indispensable part of everyday life and a fundamental act for citizens' participation in society (Dahlgren 2014:6). Civic talk is understood as a byproduct of informal discussions of politics among citizens that occurs as a natural part of daily life, and generally not purposively sought after (Klofstad 2011:11-2). The findings show that this resembles the occurrence and engagement with civic visuals on social media in the everyday life—unprompted and subtle. Despite having an extensive body of research on visual protests in contemporary research related to digital activism, the latent and subtle expressions of civic talk online by means of visuals are still underexplored. This is understandable, as these subtle expressions neither achieve virality nor circulate through replication in the way memes do. Based on the data collection process in

this study, researching visual practices in civic talk requires much contribution in contextualising, gathering, and interpreting such data individually. By the same token, although civic talks are understood as 'accidental' occurrences in the everyday (Klofstad 2011:12), the present study underlines that while interactions with civic visuals might not be consciously sought after by users on social media, there are few prerequisites for citizens to participate. To interpret and interact with civic visuals, contextualisation through knowledge of social and political issues, as well as some degree of visual literacy and cultural experience in a specific time and place, is often required. By the same token, it is necessary to conduct the research with a design that does not employ big data analytics but takes these civic cultural, more gentle and discrete visual expressions into account. In forming and developing the notion of civic visuals, I explored the material using concepts from Dewey's aesthetic theories and insights from visual culture theory, given their artistic nature. Theorising visual and aesthetic expressions in political participation is becoming more widely recognised within the growing fields of visual culture and politics in this image-based age (Bleiker 2018). As stated in the introduction chapter, digital activism and visual protests have been studied in many different fields. However, while researchers have generally focused on forms of engagement intended to attract attention and solidarity from local and international communities, many qualitative studies on this topic lack empirical perspectives on how people and their engagement with visual expressions on social media adapt to shifting political circumstances, in particular it fails in addressing the growing significance of the ephemeral and implicit expressions in visual protest culture (Pernin 2021:106). In this regard, this present study focuses on how ambiguity, nostalgia, and playfulness are key to the evolvement of civic talk in societies that appear outwardly peaceful yet remain clouded by instability and uncertainty for activists and citizens.

The aim of the research was to examine the nuances and aesthetics of seemingly ordinary visual expressions on social media that can be interpreted as a subtle form of engagement in civic talks once contextualised. The assumption is that when civil society transforms from a more diverse and tolerant environment to a controlled and restrictive one, practices of civic engagement change accordingly. As this study confirms, when open participation is restricted and online participation is under higher surveillance, civic engagement becomes more ambiguous, even when in the form of visuals. Compared to protest art circulated in the earlier social movements in Hong Kong, civic visuals during what can be termed as a social movement abeyance phase are less informative and descriptive, but often embed depictions of emotions, remembrance, nostalgia, and elements of play and humour. As one of the users writes:

> The illustration isn't meant to convey information since it lacks any written words. My hope is that, after viewing my work, you'll take a moment to reflect, find your own perspective, and consider what actions you can take.

The findings show that rather than communicating tactics, information, and strategies, civic visuals place more emphasis on sustaining connections, solidarity, memories, and feelings within communities. Oftentimes, civic visuals come across as ambiguous for outsiders as they are intended for people who are already aware and informed. By conducting an Instagram walkthrough, as well as thematic analysis and iconological interpretation, the collected material in relation to different topics of political discussion, this thesis argues that the emergence of civic visuals is an important part of the process of how citizens navigate their engagement with political and civic discussions in digital spaces under growing surveillance and uncertainty. Civic visuals are not merely about the communication of political opinions—they define the power of visuals and aesthetics in fostering engagement and bridging emotional and nostalgic connections between individuals within different temporal landscapes. The following part elaborates on these findings by addressing the research questions in detail.

# Key findings

The importance of understanding the aesthetics of protests has been widely discussed, particularly regarding their role in fostering social change and mobilising protesters (Olcese & Savage 2015:723; Doerr et al. 2013). Previous studies have also problematised the performance and roles of protesters in appropriating visual culture and examined how aesthetics is used in protest to communicate political voices (Glas et al. 2020:17-20). Building on these empirically rich discussions in various case studies, this thesis shifts the focus by examining the aesthetics of political expressions employed by activists and protesters, seen as an evolving form of civic talk, that occurs not only during active phases of social movements but also in other periods, including times of movement abeyance.

A key concern is how citizens who might not identify themselves as protesters or activists use aesthetic and symbolic representations to discuss politics in everyday life (as opposed to participating in protests in the streets). Early in the research process, it became clear that this visual material should neither be categorised as protest art nor activist art. Through interpreting the images and reviewing literature across media studies, social movement studies, and visual culture investigations, I began searching for a conceptual term to contextualise and define the material collected in this study. Engaging with Deweyan aesthetic theory and Dahlgren's theory of civic cultures to examine how civic talk on social media transforms amid changing political conditions, this thesis contributes new knowledge on the evolving forms of civic engagement and subtle visual protest, articulated through the concept of *civic visuals*.

By situating engagement with civic visuals within contemporary civic life in Hong Kong, I have demonstrated how Instagram users employ and interact with seemingly ambiguous expressions and playful appropriations of political contexts that evoke emotional significance and foster bonds based on shared passions for nostalgia and democratic values within civic communities.

## Conceptualising civic visuals

This section will develop the key findings in relation to a broader discussion on civic visuals as an artistic form of latent engagement. In answering the first sub-question—what civic visuals are and how they may be interpreted as subtle forms of engagement on social media, a conceptualisation must be developed beyond a theoretical understanding. As outlined at the beginning of this thesis, I approached civic visuals as visual content that appears mundane and playful yet carries underlying political meanings, as a form of civic talk among users on social media. I argued that civic visuals should be understood as visual tools voluntarily produced by members of civic communities to strengthen communal ties and promote the public good. While civic visuals do not always explicitly reveal the creator's intent or political stance, subtle clues and appropriations of political situations are often expressed. I also argued for the necessity of introducing a new term to conceptualise civic engagement with visuals, particularly during periods of social movement abeyance, as existing notions of protest art or political art fail to adequately situate this form and style of engagement, both in terms of how and why these illustrations are created and how they are intended to be interpreted.

Based on the research findings, I now elaborate on this initial conceptualisation. In terms of genre and style, civic visuals are clearly distinct from protest art and political memes, despite sharing certain commonalities. Based on how users describe themselves in their Instagram biographies, they do not necessarily identify as activists or protesters, but rather as artists and creators of Hong Kong. These images may not be produced for protesting purposes, but tend to be artistic and creative expressions of how citizens engage with certain political issues and the debates around them online—potentially with the hope of representing similar views of other community members and sparking engagement and interaction on the platform. Furthermore, the analysis shows that civic visuals do not intend to be appropriated or reappropriated by other users on social media, unlike political memes. In this thesis, they are understood as individually curated artistic works created by artists who employ diverse aesthetic forms, including humour and various sensory styles. More than the form of political entertainment that memes represent (Denisova 2019:3), civic visuals contain aesthetic qualities that appeal to and invite audience to engage. The findings highlight the significance of ambiguity embedded in civic symbols appropriated for various instances in this case study. These visuals often rely on subtle cultural and/or political visual clues that require

audiences to interpret the underlying meaning of the image in relation to contentious politics. The prominent sense of ambiguity embedded in these visuals play a role in blurring the boundaries between online political and cultural discussion. While this creates a space that invites citizens to engage in discussion, it also reaffirms their sense of belonging to the civic community.

This leads us to a more elaborate discussion of how engagement and interpretation of civic visuals are contextual. Here, I draw on the six dimensions of Dahlgren's civic cultures framework to present a more structured conceptual approach to civic visuals. First, civic knowledge is fundamental to the production, dissemination, and interpretation of civic visuals. It is key for civic visuals to facilitate meaningful discussions on social media based on some kind of collective knowledge that enables them to express thoughts and concerns regarding the context-specific issues represented in the images. Second, participants often share similar democratic values and a collective passion for democratic discourse. Their mutual commitment and understanding of these values play a significant role in fostering engagement with civic visuals and enabling interpretations of the symbolic meanings embedded in them. Third, trust within communities underpins citizens' engagement with civic visuals. As distrust toward authorities grows, some level of trust is redirected towards the community. Communities emerge from trust among citizens who share common values and identities, and this trust is further reinforced through representations of solidarity and a sense of belonging through civic visuals. Fourth, engagement with civic visuals is often prompted by uncertainties in a constantly changing political environment, in which open and physical spaces for civic purposes may become increasingly inaccessible to citizens. As a result, civic visuals tend to be shared and engaged with on social media platforms that enjoy higher levels of community trust and face fewer control from authorities. Fifth, engagement with civic visuals can be embedded in everyday practices beyond formal political spheres. By means of civic visuals, civic discourse intersects with cultural expressions, which evolve over time in response to political, social, and technological development. Practices and engagement with civic visuals, which depend on commercial social media platforms, are also characterised by their ephemeral nature and strong adaptability. Finally, engagement with civic visuals could be a result of the entanglements between the multidimensional identities of the communities and their members. Here, I propose that civic visuals may reflect these identities and serve as a site for connection among citizens who share these identities. As the findings suggest, civic visuals are not only related to the discussions around civic identities and the participants' roles as citizens, but also their roles as engaged members of a community who care about how their collective identity is represented in local culture and media. (A further development on the identities of these participants will be discussed in the following sections.) In conclusion, this conceptual approach contributes to a generalised understanding of the empirical material. I argue that introducing the concept of civic visuals to conceptualise informal, unprompted civic talk through engagement with visuals has

the possibility of widening the scope of future research by providing a fuller understanding of the evolution of civic talk and engagement in various forms and periods.

Regarding how civic visuals can be interpreted, a structured approach is useful for identifying relevant material in research on civic visuals and analysing their underlying meanings beneath depictions of seemingly ordinary experiences and objects. Hence, a three-part model informed by the principles of iconological analysis was developed in the process of this study as a key component of the data analysis process. This model offers an interpretative framework for identifying civic visuals among other similar visual content, particularly when the material lacks sufficient contextual clues. By categorising the visual elements and systematically uncovering disguises and subtle clues within images, this analytical approach presents a simple yet adaptable method that can be applied in future research on civic visuals across different political and cultural settings.

## Affective remembrance of silenced memories within nostalgic communities

We now turn to the second sub-question—in what ways do civic visuals promote interactions and solidarity through expressions of nostalgia and other emotions? The analysis in Chapter 6 and 7 highlights that civic visuals are used by citizens not only to convey political opinions, but also to express collective memories and a shared sense of nostalgia. In many instances, these expressions serve as a sentimental vehicle that can potentially bridge between citizens across generations, thereby strengthening connections between their political and cultural identities within a more inclusive civic community. This collective yearning for nostalgia contributes to the formations of nostalgic communities within civic cultures. For these communities, memories of the past play an important role in shaping present identities and in establishing the foundations of their core values. From this perspective, nostalgic cultural icons—which may not be inherently political—can be appropriated in civic visuals as affective symbols that communicate the values of a social identity representing the community. Within this context, the sense of familiarity and nostalgic sentiments generated by such symbols can facilitate affective social bonds among members, extending beyond connections based solely on shared political stances.

The recurring theme of remembrance throughout the analysis underscores how mobilising nostalgia and sustaining collective memories of cultural and political experiences are vital for civic communities in maintaining emotional support for one another. At the same time, nostalgic expressions help nurture a sense of togetherness through loose, undemanding, yet meaningful interactions. The findings indicate that while engagement with civic visuals may slow down when public

attention to an event reaches saturation, such engagement rarely ends abruptly or entirely. Even as public and community interest gradually fades, civic visuals continue to circulate on social media as reminders of particular events or individuals, often in the form of informal archives or reposts. Additionally, new production of civic visuals related to past events frequently resurface during anniversaries to rekindle memories and reconnecting individuals to their previous engagement through affective means. Sentimental representations of collective memories of the past are mobilised to invite engagement, even long after the original events have passed. In addition to nostalgia, a range of warm emotions is often portrayed in civic visuals, presumably to evoke similar feelings in viewers and, by extension, to foster affective interactions among individuals who share these sentiments.

Based on the analysis of user interactions on Instagram, this thesis proposes that affective expressions of hope, resilience, gratitude, and sorrow in these visuals serve as emotional anchors for citizens who are collectively experiencing sudden and significant changes in their political environment and daily lives. In the aftermath of mass arrests, censorships, and other forms of repressions, it is understandable that confronting these challenges alone can feel overwhelming and daunting. Therefore, sustaining engagement in conversations about unfolding realities—however subtle or ephemeral—is crucial for mitigating feelings of isolation. In navigating these changes, particularly when free expression is discouraged, civic visuals may help facilitate and maintain engagement in discussions about past and present contentious issues. In this way, the memories form during and after social movements can be preserved rather than silenced in future narratives about the present.

## Playful aesthetics as invitation in latent engagement

Moving on to the third sub-question, this section addresses how citizens reimagine politics as a game involving different players and opponents, and how they communicate their roles and agency through engaging with civic visuals. In contrast to how symbols are appropriated based on their closeness to everyday and nostalgic memories from the perspective of civic communities, this part of the analysis underscores the necessary distancing that civic visuals provide for participants when engaging in civic talk.

The aesthetics of civic visuals evidently embraces playful elements and invites less intense discussions among citizens while they are going through relatively intensive changes in real life. While different symbols are appropriated for different reasons, a sense of playfulness runs through images featuring different symbols, and oftentimes in interaction between users, as the collected data shows. This does not mean civic visuals are all about play and humour. Rather, the playful appropriations reflect how freedom is yearned for when thinking about the political (Doona

2016:205). Especially in social settings where political problems have persisted for some time, it is reasonable that people long for some distancing, at least temporarily. Obviously, joking or diluting the seriousness of the situation is, for most people, not seen as a solution for how citizens ideally would tackle political turbulence. However, it is a temporary outlet that fosters a sense of personal and collective freedom.

Another major finding concerning citizens' agency highlights their perception of their own roles in the 'game' of politics. For citizens who lack full voting power and democratic rights, politicians making top-down decisions occupy an almost unbeatable position in this imagined game. Meanwhile, citizens remain largely passive, as their rights and options are restricted and even dictated by powerful players. When injustice is inadequately addressed by the authorities, civic participation may seem futile. As some civic visuals show, citizens sometimes perceive and portray themselves as outnumbered or entirely controlled by their opponents, suggesting a lack of agency over their roles and positions.

Despite how little influence citizens seem to have as passive players in this 'game', these expressions reveal a persistent presence of them as active witnesses. Undoubtedly, under the domination of powerful players and the governance of restrictive rules, there are limitations as to what can be said or done by an ordinary citizen or player. This does not hinder the citizens' active role as witnesses to unfolding political events. By staying informed and engaging themselves in the act of witnessing, citizens refuse to detach from politics. This latent form of engagement may be pivotal during social movement abeyance. It shows how citizens through subtle means claim their civic agency in unstable times.

The thesis has continuously emphasised the value of the subtlety of this type of engagement. The distancing from direct conflicts is demonstrated in civic visuals. In contrast to protest art, civic visuals tend to mask confrontation by using subtle clues, depicting them through playful representation. In some instances, such as the elections and the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Hong Kong, many artists chose to engage in the discussions and portray the oppositional stances between citizens and authorities as opposite players in different game scenarios. The construction of 'us' and 'them' through play (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021:2371) is clearly reflected in the material. Here, a function of civic visuals overlaps with that of memes, which extends political events and produces insights into the politics of everyday vernacular culture (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021:2373). Playfully appropriating political contexts dilutes their political significance, yet it simultaneously reinforces the boundaries between authorities as dominant actors and pro-democracy citizens as challengers within the political system.

While aesthetic experience may be intimate, it is not private (Highmore 2011:39), meaning that playful engagement may contribute to kindling connections among individuals who are interested in political discussions but are not actively

participating for various reasons. In some instances, individuals may have transitioned from being actively involved in a protest community during the movement, into going back to their ordinary lives that do not normally include political participation. Connections that were once made between active participants in protests or other forms of activism might have faded or interrupted in the post-movement period, in which seeking connections with like-minded individuals in other communities may be yearned for. Playful aesthetics through the use of civic visuals may appeal to these individuals, inviting them to recognise present conditions while at the same time remembering another Hong Kong.

## Reflections and future trajectories

This part of the conclusion will outline some of the limitations of the present study and present suggestions for future research on civic culture and subtle forms of visual expressions as latent forms of civic engagement.

In terms of methods, examining civic engagement without directly involving citizens represents a clear limitation of this study. I acknowledge that relying solely on my own interpretations of the image restricts the findings, as they cannot fully capture the nuances of meaning-making through engaging with civic visuals within the community. If in-depth interviews with participants were conducted, the analysis might have led to other findings. Considering the ethical dilemmas in this research, future studies would benefit from finding an appropriate balance between involving participants in interviews to develop a richer understanding of individuals' experiences and interpretations and safeguarding personal data to ensure participants' privacy and protection. With this approach, future research can also benefit from engaging with more concepts and discussions within the field of visual communication. For instance, how the visual literacy of users impacts the communication of ideas and values between individuals, and a further examination into who is welcomed and excluded in civic visual engagement.

Furthermore, several other recurring symbols that appeared in the data remained undiscussed within the scope of this study. Notable examples include a logo of a popular snack, a motorbike, and the emblem of the MTR Corporation. While this thesis has justified its analytical focus on a selected set of symbols as a logical and necessary methodological choice, broadening the examination to include these additional symbols and representations could have yielded further valuable insights in this case study. For instance, a wider analysis might have demonstrated how individual protesters or politicians are represented in civic visuals. As such, this study is yet to address the full range of mundane objects and recurring symbols that contributed to the visual landscape of civic talk in Hong Kong.

More importantly, the conceptualisation of civic visuals requires further study in other similar socio-political settings. This thesis has provided the groundwork for approaching this form of ambiguous visual content as civic engagement. However, it is necessary to broaden and enhance the validity of this current conceptualisation of civic visuals based on this case study. The focus on Instagram in this present study might have overlooked the significance of other online platforms in facilitating or sustaining the production and archival of civic visuals. By exploring and conducting cross-cultural or cross-platform research on civic visuals, a more contextualised understanding of this form of civic engagement can be achieved. Regarding concerns about the consequences of exposing such engagement for the communities, I believe that scholarly analysis of civic visuals in other media and political landscapes is necessary for producing social scientific knowledge and our understanding of civic engagement during this global democratic recession. To find and recognise these people and their communities, we claim the right to look rather than turning away from the problem (Mirzoeff 2011a; 2011b). Furthermore, acknowledging the aesthetics of protest and engagement is acutely significant for marginalised communities in different parts of the world whose voices remain unheard (McGarry et al. 2020:19). By recognising these communities and their practices, we as academics can produce knowledge that may be valuable for others facing similar challenges during this time of democratic crisis in the world.

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# Civic Visuals on Instagram

This thesis challenges the assumption that expressions that do not actively seek attention is less significant in the research of civic engagement, by foregrounding the arts of subtle resistance in contexts of social movement abeyance, heightened media censorship and digital surveillance. Drawing upon the empirical case of Hong Kong, where a National Security Law was enacted in 2020 to discourage expressions of dissident voices, this thesis examines the evolvement of pro-democracy visual protest culture in recent years and explores the social significances of engagement surrounding this evolving form of visual civic talk on Instagram. By introducing the concept of civic visuals—artwork (primarily digital) that are characterised by their ambiguity, cultural nuance, playfulness, and emotional resonance rather than overt political expressions—this thesis explores how political discussions and remembrance of social movements can be sustained by—and help sustain—civic cultures. Drawing on Dahlgren's (2003; 2005; 2009) framework of civic cultures and Dewey's (1934) aesthetic theories, this thesis approaches civic visuals as meaningful expressions that are cultivated and sustained in the everyday life.

Using a visually-driven multimethod approach, this qualitative study investigates the engagement and meanings of civic visuals and their appropriated symbols with an aim to underline their subtlety and aesthetics nuances. On the one hand, the ambiguity embedded in civic visuals suggests that these expressions seek little attention from the wider audience. On the other hand, it highlights the exclusiveness of the engagement, in which only informed and like-minded individuals within the communities are likely to participate. This thesis argues that the power of civic visuals lies not only in confrontation, but in their capacity to navigate repression creatively and unobtrusively. The findings indicate how ordinary aesthetics, personal memories, collective nostalgia, humour, and play are key to invite and sustain discussions of contentious topics and remembrance of silenced voices within online civic communities in times of uncertainty and precarity.

Through contextualising and conceptualising civic visuals, this thesis contributes to the scholarly discussions on latent form of civic engagement by shifting empirical focus from direct and explicit expressions of contention and dissent, to those that appear to be ambiguous and seemingly mundane.

**CHERYL FUNG** is a media studies researcher with an interest in visual research, civic cultures, media engagement, and artistic activism. Her work explores subtle forms of civic engagement and visual practices within online communities.

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