An investigation of citizenship construction among students in higher education: a Foucauldian perspective

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Abstract

This study, adopting the Foucauldian lenses of citizenship, investigates how a group of students understand the prevailing social discourses and how such understanding and perceptions influence students' sense of citizenship and coping strategies. Drawing on in-depth individual interviews with 28 participants from six universities in Hong Kong, the findings suggest that multiple factors have impacts on the university students' sense of citizenship, including the media as technologies to shape citizenship, the essentialized ideological differences as an apparatus of intervention to shape and act upon individuals, and the legitimacy and discordance of opinions among individuals within both physical and virtual communities. The participants were found to gradually develop an awareness of the discursive construction of the social. They were found to search for their sense of citizenship through (a) opting for one ideological stance and/or keeping silent to avoid being othered within the social discourses existing at the social, community, and family levels; (b) adopting different coping strategies when dealing with their confusion towards conflicting comments; or (c) developing news reading literacy and coming to the realization of the role media plays in discursively constructing new citizens and exercising influence over existing and potential members of communities. The implications of the findings for curriculum design and policy making to develop support measures to facilitate students' positive learning and whole-person development are discussed.

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Introduction

University students' sense of citizenship and identity underwent changes over the tensions between history, culture, ideologies, and social confrontations (Gu, 2021; Xu, 2017). Universities (perhaps worldwide) tend to be places for knowledge dissemination and idea propagation, catalysed spaces for diversifying opinions, and venues for participant mobilization. As such, this article, locating in the higher education context of Hong Kong and adopting the Foucauldian lenses of citizenship, investigates (1) how university students understand the prevailing social discourses and develop their sense of citizenship and (re)construct their identities and (2) the difficulties and challenges students face when dealing with conflicting views towards social issues and their related coping strategies in times of social unrest. This study investigates citizenship issues in the post-colonial context of Hong Kong, where there are complex concerns surrounding subjectivity, heterogeneity, and power relations. The experiences and challenges students encounter in their social movement have implications for university and policy-makers in terms of how divided opposition and misunderstandings (if any) could be disrupted, and how multiplicity in cultures, values, and ideologies could better facilitate the smoother socialization and whole-person development of students in increasingly hybridized higher education settings.

Consistent with the research context in this study, university settings elsewhere, as venues with hybridity and mobility, are likely to be faced with the challenge of how to turn diverse ideas and ideological forces with deeply-rooted social, historical, and economic reasons into resources that will (a) expose students to differences and help them look at things from different perspectives; (b) develop students' competence to deal with opposing ideas and opinions and analyse things in relation to broader sociocultural and historical happenings; (c) promote students' news reading literacy and help them understand the socially constructed and constitutive effects of discourse on social reality (Fairclough, 2003; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) to reach a balanced understanding of mass and social media presentations from diverse stances; and (d) facilitate students' positive learning experience and whole-person development. This study suggests the necessity of providing more support at the curriculum design and policy-making levels for students facing ambivalence, confusion, and challenges worldwide.

Theoretical underpinnings

Citizenship and media

A growing number of citizenship studies focus on how citizenship is achieved through social and educative practices, i.e. how citizen subjectivities are constructed through individuals' participation in cultural, economic, and working life (Birzea, 2005). A poststructural perspective conceptualizes citizenship as discursive practice and theorizes "statement", "conditions of possibility", and "power" as forms of citizenship activities (Foucault, 1972, 1984, 2007; Marshall, 1999; Nicoll et al., 2013, p. 830). In this study, we see citizenship as not merely referring to a relation between the individual and the state through legal obligations; instead, we note the different types of citizenships that can be discursively constructed through individuals' "collective participation in citizenship" (Nicoll et al., 2013, p. 830) and a "total relationship, inflected by identity, social positioning, cultural assumptions, institutional practices and senses of belonging"

(Werbner & Yuval-Davis, 1999, p. 4). Furthermore, we understand the citizen as a performative process instead of a product (Foucault, 2000) and focus on the social realities, power relations, and material practices that jointly shape citizenship formation (Meredyth & Minson, 2000). Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, we concentrate on the social relationships and material practices that shape contemporary formations of citizenship at different levels (Meredyth & Minson, 2000).

Media make available spaces wherein ideological power can be exerted on populations. We live in a time when media-driven representations provoke "pseudo-events" that overtake any relic of reality beyond what is performed or staged (McCarthy, 1998). Mass media such as television, newspapers, magazines, and movies, and social media have become important sites where citizenships and group differences are invented, re-invented, and negotiated. As Boorstin (1978) stated, "we have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create a thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life" (p. 3). Both mass and social media are situated within a complex interplay of ideological underpinnings, social assumptions, and institutional constraints. They can influence citizens to adopt approval values and sometimes shade away from reality to nurture desired social identities, set up social images, and enhance social cohesion. Indeed, media can be a form of governmentality as it seeks to promote self-governance by urging the adoption of certain subject positions (Skålén et al., 2006).

Citizenship education in higher education

Citizenship education has attracted increased scholarly attention worldwide as universities expand curricular content to include citizenship elements (e.g. Dill, 2013; McCowan, 2012; Rapoport, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2006; Yang & Hoskins, 2020). Citizenship education has been investigated regarding its effects on and implications for students, educators' perceptions and teacher training, and related curricular development and reform (Goren & Yemini, 2017). Previous studies highlight the ambiguous/heterogeneous understandings of the concept of citizenship and the challenges to creating significant learning experiences among university students (Goren & Yemini, 2017; Sklad et al., 2016). In a study conducted at a university in Britain, students reported that the notion of global citizenship mainly served a marketing purpose and could be "hardly translated into the daily realities of students and staff" (Schartner & Cho, 2017, p. 468). In the context of Argentina, Porto and Byram (2015) called for the combination of interculturally-oriented language education and citizenship education to develop students' transnational and global perspective. While increased research efforts have investigated citizenship education in secondary education (e.g. Chong, 2015), more research in higher education contexts should be conducted to explore how students perceive citizenship education, enact their citizenship, engage in citizenship practices, or construct themselves as particular citizens in specific social and cultural contexts.

This study, adopting a Foucauldian perspective on citizenship (Foucault, 2000, 2008), explores the sense of citizenship among university students, and we consider the factors of subjectivity and normalization in investigating university students' self-struggle and self-negotiation within the broader social discourse. This study will address the following questions:

1. How do students in higher education in Hong Kong understand the prevailing social discourses, and how do they develop their sense of citizenship and (re)construct their identities?
2. What are the challenges, struggles, and forms of ambivalence university students may experience in the tension associated with social and economic factors?

The study

Research context

Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 under the "one country, two systems" principle. Due to its rapid development and the rise of globalization in recent decades, Hong Kong was transformed into an international trade centre. It enjoyed a booming economy in the 1970s and gradually emerged as one of the "four little dragons" in Asia. Hong Kong's economy has witnessed many ups and downs due to various crises, such as when its stock and real estate markets collapsed overnight during the 1998 Asian financial crisis. The first decade of the handover witnessed a gradual reunion of Hong Kong and mainland China, with broader use of Putonghua, an emerging sense of national pride in the country's overall developments, especially such remarkable achievements as Yang Liwei's space mission and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, the increased integration of Hong Kong with mainland China has raised local concerns about the economy dependence and experienced ambivalence in identity construction. Hong Kong's current language policy (i.e. promoting trilingualism in English, Cantonese, and Putonghua and biliteracy in English and Chinese) emerged from its earlier social and economic development. While English has retained a relatively high socio-economic status, Putonghua is gaining popularity in educational and business contexts, and Cantonese is the most commonly adopted language in informal occasions.

University campuses in Hong Kong are not free of the discord emerging from social development (Gu, 2014, 2017, 2021; Xu, 2017). The social movements of 2014 and 2019 saw increasing numbers of on-campus social activities. Locating in higher education contexts in Hong Kong, this study aims to provide an in-depth theoretical understanding of citizenship and identity in relation to media, ideology, and broader discourse.

The participants and data collection

This study, part of a larger study exploring the citizenship and identity reconstruction of university students in social movements, drew on individual interviews with 28 local university students in Hong Kong. The 28 participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The participant recruitment advertisements were posted on forums, and the recruited participants were invited to recruit their friends who were interested joining. The participants (11 male and 17 female students from six universities) were enrolled in a variety of programmes, including general education, language education, information technology, music education, psychology, engineering, and journalism, among others. Strict confidentiality was maintained during the data collection process. Participants' personal information and interview data were kept strictly confidential, with pseudonyms being used to preserve anonymity. The background information for the participants is introduced in Table 1.

Table 1 The participants

Participant code	Gender	University	Programme	Year level
Sally	F	A	Chinese Language	Y4
Amelia	F	B	Art	Y2
Sam	M	A	Chinese Language	Y4
Adele	F	A	Chinese Language	Y4
Cathy	F	C	Journalism and Communication	Y3
Ben	M	A	Chinese Language	Y4
Alex	M	A	Chinese Language	Y4
Tina	F	A	Chinese Language	Y1
Michael	M	A	Information and Communication Technology	Y2
Tony	M	A	Psychology	Y4
Daniel	M	A	Information and Communication Technology	Y2
Daisy	F	A	Creative Arts and Culture (Music)	Y4
April	F	D	Business Administration	Y4
Tom	M	A	Mathematics	Y2
Sarah	F	A	General Studies	Y4
Nancy	F	A	Language Studies (English major)	Y2
Nason	M	C	Mathematics	Y3
Ingrid	F	C	Education	Y4
Roger	M	B	Computer Engineering	Y4
Stella	F	E	History	Y4
Ella	F	F	Electronic and Computer Engineering	Y3
Cecilia	F	D	Media	Y4
Lina	F	C	Food and Nutritional Science	Y4
Albert	M	E	History	Y4
Vincy	F	E	English Education	Y3
Grace	F	F	Media	Y4
Sabrina	F	C	Chinese Education	Y4
Victor	M	C	Physics	Y1

The participants were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting around 50 to 70 min. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to reach a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and create "accounts of why they do what they do" (Heller, 2011, p. 42). The interview questions were open-ended, eliciting the participants' understanding of the prevailing social discourse in Hong Kong and exploring how social events affected students' self-positioning, peer interaction, and family relationships and how they interpreted the happenings in the social unrest. They were also invited to share the challenges they faced regarding self-identification and peer and family relationships and the coping strategies they adopted. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the partici-pants' mother tongue, to facilitate their understanding and expression. The data for this article were collected during the COVID-19 outbreak; as such, most interviews were conducted online and audio-recorded for later transcription, with the participants' consent.

Data analysis

The interview data were transcribed by an independent researcher whose mother language was Cantonese and was trilingual in Cantonese, Putonghua, and English. The transcripts were then double-checked by two trilingual research assistants. Spoken Cantonese in colloquial form was transcribed to facilitate comprehension; the transcriber made great efforts to maintain the

original meaning of the spoken Cantonese. The excerpts from the interviews adopted by this article were translated from Chinese to English by the authors and then double-checked by an independent researcher proficient in both Chinese and English.

A "selected reading approach" (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) was adopted to uncover themes related to the research questions. Thematic analysis was adopted in the analytic process to help identify and examine different themes and patterns of meaning within the participants' data. The researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts, noting the data relevant to the research questions and teasing out initial analytic themes/subthemes based on interview details (such as interviewees' acts and strategies when engaging in peer interactions and subtle feelings and changes that may reveal their citizenship and sense of self-formation). During data analysis, the interrelations among these themes/subthemes were further exhibited regarding the theoretical framework, with theoretical categories then being developed to connect emerging themes, using an analytic narrative.

Findings

This section will present findings in three major themes, including the influence of ideological dichotomy on peer relations and sense of citizenship; the silenced groups and marginalized minority within particular camps; and coping strategies for discursive othering.

The influence of ideological dichotomy on peer relations and sense of citizenship

Groups or camps with different ideological orientations were established, and a sense of citizenship with highly homogeneous ideologies and orientations emerged. This contributed to the division between groups and a degree of forced positioning that sometimes silenced individuals. When talking about their understanding of the social issues, most participants in the study reported that different views influenced their friendships and peer identification:

> Interviewer: What are the young people's views?
> Victor: They vary. Some friends are indifferent to social issues, and they don't care what is going on. Some friends belong to the camp I am not in, and once I know their stance, I cannot keep a good relationship with him or her because it is difficult to communicate with someone who holds different views. Everything has been posted on the Internet and social media, and when you learnt about everything but still chose that position, I don't want to communicate anymore. I will exclude them in the social media from my close friends when talking about these topics.

Victor's views towards and subsequent actions regarding those holding a different stance were common among the participants in this study. On social media sites, these friends would be excluded from close-friend groupings, making exchanging ideas on relevant topics impossible. Grouping boundaries reflecting different views thus emerged. At the same time, Victor developed an understanding that the news and information available through the Internet, mass media, and social media should be sufficient for one to adopt the same political stance she took and believed her judgement was justified and sensible.

The dichotomy also influenced relationships and trust among family members. Contradiction and conflict were reported, attributable to a lack of understanding and trust among family members with different views. For example,

> Adele: Some of my friends have different views from their family members. This has caused a lot of disputes and ruined family relations. I think this is contradictory. I welcome rational discussion and can understand why people with different views think that way.

> Tina: My parents seldom expressed their position but often commented on some incidents. We seldom discussed the social issues at home to avoid disputes because we heard of a lot of poor relations between family members as a result of debates among family members.

The division also constructed new citizens and a new sense of belonging among those in the social movement who shared some of the same opinions and practices:

> Amelia: The majority in my district most hold the same stance, and we often have different activities.
> Interviewer: In what sense?
> Amelia: Before, we seldom met, and even if we took the same bus, we didn't really give the seat to others; but now, we often give seats to those who are in more need and greet each other because we joined the activities together, even though we didn't know each other… Joining a group with more people made us feel safer and strengthened the feeling that we were different from others.
> Interviewer: Have you experienced any identification change?
> Nason: I have been identifying myself as Hongkonger, but I have developed a stronger Hong Kong identity.

The experiences of these two participants were representative of others in this study. They formed a certain ethical being that included showing care (e.g. giving one's seat to another in more need) to someone they did not know but were seen as belonging to an "us" group. This sense of belonging, based on the view that "we are different and unique" in "our" culture, values, and behaviours, was strengthened as more people joined the group. Participation in gatherings and shared experiences through social media—created a community of practice that collectively formed a stronger identity.

The silenced groups and marginalized minority within particular groups

As reflected in the data, the issue of dissident voices within the camps being marginalized and silenced gradually came to the attention of the participants:

> Ingrid: In recent months, we seldom had large-scale gatherings due to the COVID-19, and I had more time to stay on my own or with a few close friends and reflect on my experiences in the past months.

Interviewer: What reflections have you got?

Ingrid: I realised that we tended to take it for granted that all young people were in the same group and held the same views towards social issues. When we raised a point of view, we expected most, if not all, people to strongly support and understand it. But when some people don't show proactive support, the majority will think minority voices are unimportant and want them to disappear. I think this is dangerous, because young people don't necessarily hold the same view.

Ingrid shared her concern that different extents of authority were given to individuals with different levels of identification with ideological orientations, potentially turning a multiplicity of voices into one. Individuals were subdivided by their different degrees of ideological orientation and, following this differentiation logic, given different degrees of legitimacy.

Some participants observed that a simplified and essentialized social label was established by the members of one group to differentiate themselves from members of the other:

Daniel: The news reports from both sides also showed an either black or white picture. But I found that the ideological stances won't decide whether this person will do something wrong or right. We need to develop news-reading literacy among students [so they] think about things in different ways. Also, members tend to believe that members from their group have higher quality education, better professions, and better understanding of social issues than most members of other groups.

Daniel observed that the social identities of members from different groups had been simplified, with different dimensions (professional, educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, etc.) being created through news media and social media. Daniel suggested young students were easily guided by polarized views, indicating the necessity of providing space for different views in news reports and avoiding linearly describing either group with absolute positivity or negativity.

This essentialization not only silenced individuals' views but also restrained further communication between those with different views, as illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

Alex: In our social media group, once we realizing some had views about the social issues that differed from ours, we established a new group in the social media. I didn't use our majority advantage to influence friends who took opposite views but avoided argument and discussion.

Alex was aware of people's ideological polarization and fragmentation due to the mutual exclusion. An avoidance strategy was often adopted, i.e. avoiding further communication with those who held different views. This lack of in-depth communication between different view holders further deepened the division and made mutual understanding less possible. It also limited the opportunities for individuals with different views to listen to each other and learn the underlying reasons for the differences, costing them the opportunity to develop different perspectives on social events.

Coping strategies towards discursive othering

"The others" and the dichotomy between and opposition of different ideological stances were found to be discursively constructed through different channels, such as mass media, social media, and daily conversations. The participants in this study reported drawing on different sources of information and views about social activities, placing more reliance on and trust in social media sources that shared their position and echoed their opinions. For example:

> Daniel: I retrieved most [of my] information from social media and would share the information with my friends because they held the same position and had no inner contradiction.
> Interviewer: Did you regularly access news from the mass media, such as newspaper and TV channels?
> Daniel: Sometimes I would check up and find different views, but I would just read it; I would not believe it.

When exposed to information and news reports from different sources, the participants tended to exclude views from sources that took opposite stances to establish stronger identification with their community and justify and strengthen their personal views.

Nonetheless, some participants developed an awareness that "reality" was constructed differently in different social media and mass media. Some participants gradually showed an intention to learn about the different sides of a story and make new judgments. As indicated by Sally:

> Sally: I read news mainly from different social media sources and mass media. They have different views, but I seldom discussed them with friends for fear of damaging our relationship in case we didn't agree with each other. Reading more and more information, I tended to adopt a neutral way.

Sally's experiences of receiving and analysing information and news with diverse stances indicated that the contrasting "reality" presented on different news sources, though sometimes perplexing, provided an opportunity for young people to analyse and make judgements. They developed different kinds of strategies to deal with contrasting news:

> Victor: I usually read the messages left by different people and learnt how different people thought. I also watched the video from websites without narration to learn about the happenings.
> Sabrina: Newspapers have their own stances and adopt their own language to present their stance. I understand if you only read news from one source, you only hear one voice. If you want to know different angles, you need to read news from different sources. Sometimes I don't want to accept too extreme views and choose some neutral reports.

The participants gradually developed a new relation to the news, which in many cases was contrasting. They searched for information in different accounts posted by individual agents or media. They hoped to analyse multifaceted information from different sources to have a better understanding.

The process involved discovering the truth, reproducing it, and developing intervention strategies, through which individuals became more knowable and accessible to bio-power. For example, Cathy said:

> Cathy: People tend to read the news reports and comments in congruence with their own views. There is a lot of biased information from both sides. Media cannot take the only role of guiding the audience, and I think under such a situation, even though there is a kind of neutral and highly credible media, the majority of people will be influenced by their political stance when choosing the voices to believe. Education takes a more shaping role in one's values. Education needs to nurture the students' news literacy to read more before making a judgment… I think the reporters need to get rid of their personal political views and report the truth. This is news. But it is really difficult to draw a line to decide what is objective. A fair and just report needs the reporter's careful consideration of every single word.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think how their stances are shaped?
>
> Cathy: A lot of factors, in my experience, friends' influence, the information and messages which have only-sided views in the social media group, different ideas from the parents, news reports in the public mass media, etc. When people only think of the personal benefits, the world won't move forward. In the long run, the university should include the emotional support and remedy strategy into the curriculum and provide space for discussion and respect of different views.

Similar to several other participants', Cathy's comments showed a young person's reflection on his/her experiences within and observation of the social movements. In her accounts, Cathy moved from being a participant to being an observer. She analysed the intertwined factors that might influence the shaping of individuals' ideological orientation and tendency to choose news sources that matched their views, which further deepened the division between those with different stances. Moving beyond making a decision on right and wrong, Cathy emphasized the importance of education in developing students' news literacy and nurturing an open attitude and an ability to analyse diversity, and the critical role the university can play by establishing support schemes and incorporating life and values education courses into the curriculum. Furthermore, universities are becoming spaces with increasing hybridity of cultures, values, and languages; Cathy's accounts reflected students' need for support measures to develop and sustain their whole-person development.

Discussion

This investigation of university students' experiences was enlightened by employing a Foucauldian perspective on citizenship formation (Foucault, 2000, 2008) and exploring the constitutive effects of legitimate citizenship discourse on individuals' self-positioning and peer and family relationships. As illustrated in Figure 1, multiple factors impact university students' sense of citizenship, including the media (as technologies to shape citizenship), the essentialized ideological divide (as an apparatus of intervention to shape and acts upon individuals), and the legitimacy and discordance in opinions among individuals within both physical communities and virtual communities. The participants searched for their sense of

citizenship through (a) opting for a specific ideological stance and/or keeping silent to avoid being othered at the social, community, and family levels; (b) adopting different coping strategies when dealing with their confusion towards conflicting news reports and comments and the views of different social media groups; and (c) developing news reading literacy and coming to the realization of the role media plays in discursively constructing new citizens and exercising governance over existing and potential community members. The findings will be discussed below in light of the theoretical framework proposed in Figure 1.

Citizenship in virtual and physical communities

University students face the social need to strive for legitimacy and gain citizenship in both virtual and physical communities. The exercise of power in gaining a legitimate position and citizenship can be both top-down and bottom-up. For example, the government employs citizenship discourses to construct or re-construct responsible, moral citizens (cf. Jerome, 2012; Kisby, 2012; Rose, 1999). At the same time, citizenship discourses play a part in wider group discourses. In the current research context, citizenship discourse may align with social integration discourse through government policies and curriculum; it may also reconfigure the existing social order through citizen discourses elsewhere, such as on social media (cf. Isin & Nielsen, 2008). The findings of this study show the "non-universal or unified" nature of citizenship and how citizenship has been constructed at multiple levels in both physical communities (such as different kinds of student associations and social groups) and virtual communities (such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups). In this study, citizenship is discursively and heterogeneously established through members using their authority to govern "what [is] granted with legitimacy, and what people say individuals may do, achieve, or receive as citizens in a particular situation" (Nicoll et al., 2013, p. 839).
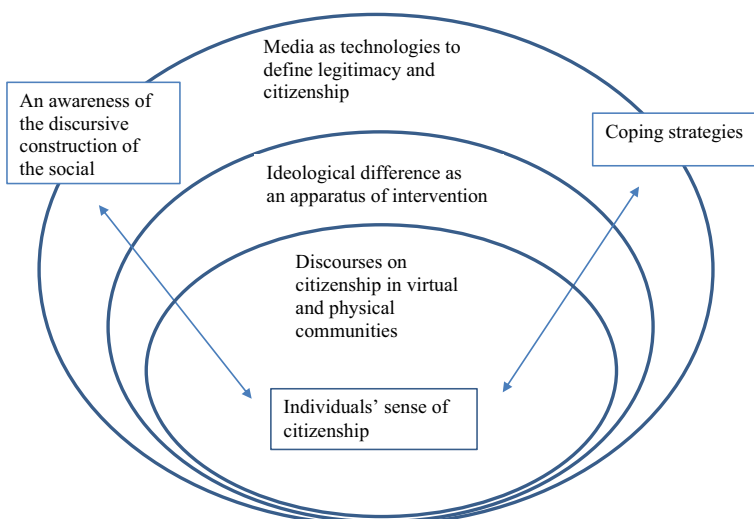

Fig. 1 The construction of sense of citizenship among university students

Ideological difference as an apparatus of intervention

The findings suggest that the ideological divides serve as apparatus through which power is exercised across different contexts and multiple layers, instead of given categories (Foucault, 2008). The labels of different ideological orientations, instead of existing as procedural and mundane discursive categories (Foucault, 2000), construct reality in a manner that is not "neutral, objective, and automated" (Selwyn, 2015, p. 6). In other words, social and ideological discourses become apparatus of intervention that shape and act upon individuals. The essentialized dichotomy of ideological views has inevitably created an effect of inclusion and exclusion, constructing new citizens and new senses of belonging. As reflected in the analysis of the participants' experiences, the dichotomy distinguished a certain group from others in the counter group. At the same time, groups needed more members to strengthen their legitimacy, leading to a hard division between groups with different political orientations.

Therefore, ideological dichotomy can be viewed as a form of biopower that establishes new grouping boundaries and sometimes even materializes through the governing apparatus logic of inclusion and exclusion, such as the economic circles within different camps. In the process, the multiplicity of voices becomes singular, and many individuals who do not identify strongly with a particular ideological orientation find it difficult to become legitimate members of mainstream communities. Furthermore, friendship and family relationships are intertwined with individuals' choice of stance. In this sense, the ideological essentialization at the societal level influenced university students' self-positioning, peer relation, and grouping.

Media as technologies to define legitimacy and citizenship

Power "exists only when it is put into action" (Foucault, 1982, p.789). The findings suggest that power could also be exercised through citizenship discourses in mass media and social media in the process of "shaping societies and subjectivities" (Nicoll et al., 2013, p. 838). As reflected in the data analysis in this investigation, the shared and accepted knowledge needed for legitimate citizenship in a particular group was re-iterated and strengthened in media and community discourses, in turn becoming the channel through which power was exercised to produce subjects who acted through "a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault, 1982, p. 789) to construct the respective camps.

Although the university students found the news and opinions perplexing, some participants experienced individual development in holistic thinking and analytical skills when faced with perplexing news and opinions. They came to realize the role of mass media and social media in constructing new discourses on citizenship and exercising governance over existing and potential members of communities. Some students learnt to understand the nature of "truth" and started to read different sources of information, including media sources whose viewpoints differed from theirs. The findings also suggested the virtual space created through the Internet and web technologies interacted closely with the physical space and that both physical and virtual spaces provided contexts in which to establish new citizens, set up a sense of belonging, create group division or cohesion, accumulate social capital, and enable discussions.

The participants in this study adopted different coping strategies, as well as the views of different social media groups. They sometimes hid their views or rushed to judgement on social happenings, be it to avoid being marginalized or excluded from the community,

maintain their legitimate position within it, or preserve their friendships. Therefore, the findings reflect the necessity of news reading literacy, and the important role education should play in developing students' values judgement and ability to understand and analyse differences in a digital era characterized by mobility and diversity.

Conclusion and implications

This study has explored university students' experiences in social movements in Hong Kong and investigated (1) how they understood the prevailing social discourses and developed their sense of citizenship; (2) how the new citizenships that developed therein influenced students' identity reconstruction, peer interaction, and family relationships; and (3) the difficulties and challenges students faced when dealing with conflicting views related to social issues, and the coping strategies they adopted. The findings suggested that, in social movements, ideological differentiation became an apparatus of intervention acting upon the individuals, who were affected by the inclusion and exclusion created by the dichotomy, which constructed new citizenships and senses of belonging. This points to the necessity for universities to include citizenship education, especially civic engagement and global perspective factors, in their curricula to develop students' analytical skills and intercultural citizenship. Explorations of curriculum development would be worthwhile to enable university students to develop critical cultural awareness, a perspective of linguistic and conceptual relativism, and the capability to communicate in transnational communities in today's globalized and internationalized world. Furthermore, it would be desirable if more opportunities for overseas exchange programmes and study abroad programmes could be provided to enhance students' exposure to and understanding of cultural differences (Baker & Fang, 2021).

The young university students in this study, as active agents, developed strategies to cope with their confusions during the social unrest and their being exposed to opposing opinions, such as avoiding rushing to judgement when analysing information from different sources, including those contradicting their own views. They also limited the frequency and depth of discussion and debate with those holding potentially different views for fear of negatively influencing peer relations. Therefore, universities worldwide, which are faced with similar situations, could deliver workshops and organize activities to develop students' sense of belonging of mother or heritage culture and to create platforms where diverse cultures, values, and ideologies can interact rationally and academically and act as researchers with reflexivity to explore social events.

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