

News Media Representation on 2019 Hong Kong Protestors

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Abstract: Protests in Hong Kong occurred frequently for years. In June 2019, media had shifted focus towards Hong Kong again as a series of Hong Kong Protests took place with mass street gatherings regarding the amendment of a bill. Online media were used to report news regarding this social unrest. This study aims to find out how the Hong Kong Protestors were represented in the news reports from China and Hong Kong respectively. In order to answer the research questions formulated in this study, activation of social actor as a branch of role allocation was selected from the framework by van Leeuwen (2008) to aid in understanding activation of social actors according to and the framework to study Hong Kong Protestors as social actors in the Hong Kong protests series that happened in 2019. The study collected over 80 news reports from China Daily (CD) and South China Morning Post (SCMP) in the duration of six months starting from the first protest in June 2019 to December 2019. The news reports were analyzed according to the Van Leeuwen's (2008) Representation of Social Actor. The results of the study found that in general, both news outlets, CD and SCMP depicted instances of activation of the social actors in Hong Kong protests. The protestors were negatively represented in news reports of these two media outlets. The findings would provide insight to readers on how activation in role allocation is depicted through Discourse Analysis.

Keywords: *protest, discourse analysis, role allocation, social actors, representation, Hong Kong*

1. Introduction

In 2019, a series of protests occurred in Hong Kong. The protests were depicted in medias all around the world in the span of six months as it started in June 2019 and died down in early January 2020, thus this has become the focus of this study. This paper discusses how the Hong Kong protestors were represented in the news reports from China and Hong Kong. It aims to shed light to the understanding of how the social actors are depicted in the Hong Kong protests. News articles in the form of online newspapers from two media outlets, namely *South China Morning Post (SCMP)* in Hong Kong and *China Daily (CD)* from Mainland China were then

analyzed through Discourse Analysis (DA) to help acquire the answers to the research questions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse in Media on Protests in Hong Kong

As mentioned in a study in 2019 [13]. Protests are deemed normal in Hong Kong. The citizens of Hong Kong are known to protests on the streets to protect their rights.

This study examines the portrayal of the Hong Kong protesters in news coverage originating from both China

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and Hong Kong. Its objective is to enhance the comprehension of how individuals involved in the Hong Kong protests are portrayed. The study focuses on a six-month period, spanning from June to December 2019, aiming to investigate how social actors are depicted in media narratives. By utilizing Discourse Analysis (DA), the researchers analyzed online newspaper articles from two media sources: the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) in Hong Kong and the *China Daily* (CD) from Mainland China. The aim was to answer the research query about how these two outlets, SCMP and CD, utilize role allocation of social actors in their discourse analysis within their news reporting of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests.

The utilization of discourse analysis in analyzing global news reports about the Hong Kong protests involves studying how the protests are portrayed through language and the way various individuals and groups are depicted, including protesters, the Chinese government, and international entities [14]. A study that investigated how media stories shape public opinions and impact the worldwide conversation about the protests [15]. This research concentrates on uncovering how social actors are portrayed in terms of their roles by newspapers from CD and SCMP. Consequently, this paper talks about the different approaches used by different media sources in their language and the potential consequences of these approaches.

Another study that has looked at social unrest would be *Analysis of Social Unrest Events using Spatio-Temporal Data Clustering and Agent-Based Modelling* done in 2019 [4]. The researcher looks at social unrest such as appeals, protests, conflicts, fights and mass violence that has resulted from a wide range of diverse factors making the analysis of causal relationships challenging, with high complexity and uncertainty [4]. Unrest events resulted in significant changes in a society ranging from new policies and regulations to regime change. The study has made prediction of social unrest that primarily been done through case-studies and study of social media messaging using various natural language processing techniques.

3. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the representation of Hong Kong protestors in terms of activation in role allocation. The news articles from CD and SCMP were analysed using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework of the representation of social actors, which uses the sociological categories of discourse to analyse texts.

A comprehensive analysis was carried out on the texts that focusses on how social actors were depicted in the context of the Hong Kong protests spanning from June 13th to December 31st, 2019. A deliberate selection process yielded a total of 80 pertinent articles for analysis. The chosen articles were those containing specific keywords associated with the Hong Kong protests and protesters. The provided framework was utilized to analyze the content of

these articles.

4. Findings and Discussion

Role allocation investigates the different roles that social actors are given in the discourse. It emphasises that the role of the social actor does not require its correspondence with the grammatical function it was given. Social actors in role allocation are either active or passive. Activation refers to cases in which the social actor was given a dynamic part in an action, as in 'passengers' in the sentence "the passengers were moved to another place".

Activation is also grammatically realised via circumstantialisation whereby 'by' and 'from' are used to signify the agent. For instance, 'police' in the sentence "the injured protestors received aid from the police". Furthermore, pre-modification and post-modification of nominalisations can also represent activation, such as 'public' in the sentence "the public reaction to the protestors was positive".

4.1 Activation of Social Actor in China Daily (CD)

This category of role allocation analyses the instances in which social actors represent an active dynamic force in an action as depicted in the discourse. Findings showed that the Hong Kong Protestors were activated more than they were subjected or beneficialised. The grammatical manifestation of role allocation in this study was predominantly represented by social actors in the subject position and postmodification of nominalisation.

To thoroughly examine the representation of activation on Hong Kong protestors as a social actor, various types of transitivity (*i.e.*, material, mental, relational and verbal processes) were analysed to study the manner in which Hong Kong Protestors were signified in relation to the transitivity categories that they were associated with.

The analysis of the data using material process showed that the movement of protestors was the most prominent material process in the news report. The material process demonstrated that the movement of Hong Kong Protestors were subdivided into neutral verbs, signifying Hong Kong Protestors' movement within Hong Kong. Example 1 below was taken from *China Daily* news reports in June 2019.

"3,700 Protestors had crossed the border."

"1,222 Hong Kong Protestors enter the city in the past 24 hours."

(*China Daily*, 11/06/2019)

Example 1 showed how material process depicted the movement of protestors as it signified Hong Kong Protestors movement into and within Hong Kong. The numbers that were used to show the amount of Hong Kong Protestors and proved that the protestors were moving in large scale groups. This particular data had shown how Hong Kong protestors as social actors were activated in the news reports.

Moreover, verbs were additionally employed to portray the immense scale of the Hong Kong protesters as they entered the city. As Example 2 sourced from *China Daily* during the months of July and August 2019 showed how the italicized words in the example demonstrate how verbs carry meaning in the depiction of social actors.

“Protestors have *flooded* the airport of Hong Kong and refused to leave.”

“More than 12,000 Hong Kong Protestors *pour* into city centre of Hong Kong for riots since yesterday.”

(*China Daily*, 16/08/2019)

“Thousands of people *had gathered* at Chater Garden, heart of Hong Kong's financial and administrative district.”

“...and *occupied* a major road in a procession toward Wan Chai.”

(*China Daily*, 29/07/2019)

Other than that, the second most prominent subject of the material process that were associated with Hong Kong Protestors represented the difficulties that they were inflicting to Hong Kong and Hong Kong's government. Example 3 below display how it was depicted.

“The *burden* those protestors are *imposing* on the local authorities.”

“Hong Kong Protestors are increasing, putting the government to such *desperate* measures.”

(*China Daily*, 15/06/2019)

“Thousands of people *gathered* at Chater Garden, heart of Hong Kong's financial and administrative district and *occupied* a major road in a procession toward Wan Chai causing *standstill traffic*.”

(*China Daily*, 29/07/2019)

From the examples provided in Example 3, it can be clearly seen that the social actors, which were the Hong Kong Protestors were represented as the major group causing the difficulties to the Hong Kong's government. This relates to the actions of Hong Kong Protestors during the protests that affected the government in various ways.

Additionally, Hong Kong Protestors were also represented as a collective group of social actors. Example 4 below shows some of the occurrences that can be found in the news reports of *China Daily*.

“More than 1.6 million Hong Kong Protestors, *concentrated* in city center.”

“Protestors are currently *amassed* along the main roads in city centers.”

“Thousands of protestors *crammed* into vehicles.”

(*China Daily*, 18/08/2019)

“Thousands of people *gathered* at Chater Garden last month.”

“The weekly disruptive protests are *unsettling*.”

(*China Daily*, 31/08/2019)

From the examples above, it can be seen that in the reports of *China Daily*, there were events where social actors were depicted through a collective group. The word “people” followed by negative connotations showed how the social actor was being shown in a negative manner. Although the examples above only provided occurrences from selected news in August 2019, similar pattern can be seen throughout the other months as well. This proves that *China Daily* was consistent in reporting on the protests.

Meanwhile, through the analysis of mental process, it indicates that the Hong Kong Protestors were represented predominantly in terms of the challenges they are facing during the Hong Kong Protests. For instance, “the harsh conditions” was mentioned multiple times by *China Daily* in their news articles. Example 5 shows several occurrences from *China Daily news reports* in terms of the description of “harsh conditions”.

“Hong Kong police on Friday said the protestors were *under the sun* for more than 13 hours.”

(*China Daily*, 31/08/2019)

“A group of radical protestors illegally cut off traffic, in the *hot summer weather*.”

“On Aug 4, some radical protestors mounted more attacks at the liaison office that was evacuated due to the *building conditions*.”

(*China Daily*, 18/08/2019)

From the Example 5, *China Daily* news reports had occurrences in terms of describing the conditions of the Hong Kong Protestors while protesting.

4.2 Activation of Social Actor in South China Morning Post (SCMP)

Activation in the online media news reports *South China Morning Post* was grammatically manifested in the form of social actors in the subject position and postmodification of nominalisation. There are instances of activation in this research in which Hong Kong Protestors are depicted as an active dynamic force in an activity. Similar to the analysis of the online media news reports of *China Daily*, this part of the analysis examines the role allocation by utilising transitivity analysis. Transitivity is fundamental in examining the diverse material, mental, relational, and verbal processes that are associated with Hong Kong Protestors in the online media of *South China Morning Post*.

In the analysis of material process, Hong Kong Protestors were predominantly represented in terms of their movements. Similar to the analysis of the online media news reports of *China Daily*, Hong Kong Protestors were represented via the use of impersonal verbs. Below are the instances extracted from the news reports.

“Hong Kong Protestors can only *cross through* official border.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 12/06/2019)
“Some 1,000 Hong Kong Protestors *crossed into* China early Saturday.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 13/07/2019)
“1,043 Hong Kong Protestors *entered* Hong Kong in the last 24 hours.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 03/09/2019)
“More than a thousand Hong Kong Protestors *escaped to* city center.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 21/09/2019)

Moreover, social actor was also analysed through the use of verbs that figuratively depicting the uncontainable size of the social actor. The examples are presented below on the occurrences from the newspapers.

“A *flood* of Hong Kong Protestors has slowed to a trickle.”
(*South China Morning Post*, 12/06/2019)

“Hong Kong Protestors start *flooding* into outskirts of town.”
(*South China Morning Post*, 14/06/2019)

“Hong Kong Protestors *stream* into all major cities.”
(*South China Morning Post*, 30/06/2019)

Mental process was also observed in the news reports of *South China Morning Post*. Such mental process was used heavily in many articles published by *South China Morning Post* on the Hong Kong protest. The most common mental process found through the articles representing the aspiration of Hong Kong Protestors.

“Hong Kong Protestors want their home to be safe.”

“The Hong Kong Protestors need more than basic care.”

“These Hong Kong Protestors hope to get better security and secure better living with new law.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 10/11/2019)

Other than that, the third most common mental process showcased the cognitive process of Hong Kong Protestors. The example below represents the cognitive process of protestors.

“Hong Kong Protestors *will not come to terms* with the fact with Leader Lam’s rule”.

“Hong Kong Protestors see protesting as just a *stepping point*”.

(*South China Morning Post*, 16/11/2019)

The example above provides readers with the information that mental process represents the cognitive processes of Hong Kong Protestors whereby *South China Morning Post* took into consideration incorporating the Hong Kong Protestors’ voices and opinions on the reasons the protestors were still with the ongoing protests.

Based on the analysis of news reports, it can be said that the verbal process occurred in the news reported by *South China Morning Post*. Narration of stories tended to be the most frequent verb used which was intended to report the

stories of Hong Kong Protestors narrating to the media and their opinions regarding the situation. The examples below are extracted from some of the news reported by *South China Morning Post*.

“Hong Kong Protestors *say* Leader Lam show biasness.”

“Hong Kong Protestors *tell us* about their experiences.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 03/11/2019)

“Many of the Hong Kong Protestors *talk about* officers going door to door in their homes.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 16/11/2019)

From the examples above, active participation by the Hong Kong protestors were portrayed in emphasizing the issues surrounding the protest by relating to their leader at that period and actions by the authorities. Additionally, their active participation was highlighted through the verbs ‘tell’ to inform the world on their personal opinions, thus showing that the media cared about their thoughts. There were other instances that are similar to the examples from different dates of news reports. This concludes that in terms of verbal process, *South China Morning Post* allowed activation of social actor, particularly the Hong Kong protestors.

Meanwhile, the second common process would be verbal process depicting the criticism that Hong Kong Protestors expressed towards the conditions of the protests in the city of Hong Kong. The examples below are occurrences extracted from the news reports.

“Hong Kong Protestors *complain about conditions* in the protest site.”

“Hong Kong Protestors have *complained about conditions*.”

“Hong Kong Protestors *complained of inadequate space*.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 19/08/2019)

When the data from *SCMP* articles were analysed, it can be concluded that that the third most common verbal process representing Hong Kong Protestors was in terms of the protestors’ vocalisation. Examples below show some instances extracted from the news reports.

“Hong Kong Protestors *vent their anger* at the leader’s failure.”

“The Hong Kong Protestors *do not welcome* the lawmakers.”

“Hong Kong Protestors *shouted on* Wednesday at the city square.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 20/08/2019)

When compared, occurrences were prevalent in majority of the reported news, particularly in cases involving statements from court hearings by Hong Kong’s leader, Carrie Lam at that time. This also indicated that from the examples above, the Hong Kong Protestors, as social actors, indeed possessed a means of expression through verbal process such as ‘vent’ and ‘shouted’.

In addition to verbal process, relational process was prevalently found in the news published by the *South China Morning Post*. In the examination of online media news articles from the *South China Morning Post*, the most frequently occurring relational process was employed to depict the Hong Kong Protesters as being displaced as the protesters were moving from places as well as causes unsafe riots, such as the statement “Hong Kong Protesters are relocated on multiple occasions”. Examples of this usage were presented below, extracted from a news report by the South China Morning Post.

Moreover, this category was also used to show active participation in signifying the placement of Hong Kong Protestors. Examples shown below are extracted from news reports from *South China Morning Post*, showing relational process in depicting the status of Hong Kong Protestors.

“Hong Kong Protestors *remain hopeful*.”

“The Hong Kong Protestors *remain terrified* of the unchanged law.”

“Hong Kong Protestors *remained strong* by their points.”

(*South China Morning Post*, 30/12/2019)

The examples stated above are based after an event of mass gathering after Hong Kong Leader, Carrie Lam released a statement regarding the amendment of the bill. The examples showed how Hong Kong Protestors as social actors were being displaced. These also showed emotions of hope by the social actors. Such emotions were seen on various news reports published by *South China Morning Post* regarding the series of Hong Kong protests.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present article has examined newspaper articles on 2019 Hong Kong protest qualitatively through the use of activation of role allocation in van Leeuwen's theory (2018). In the analysis from two main news outlets in China; *China Daily (CD)* and *South China Morning Post (SCMP)* through the discourse examination of the portrayal of social actor regarding the protest, both media has presented the Hong Kong protestors as social actor actively through the language used. Such active participation was found in various processes like material, mental, verbal and relational. In China Daily news, Hong Kong protestors deemed to be displayed in terms of their movements during the protests, generating problems to their government and thus, collectively created a negative image on the Hong Kong protestors through material and mental processes. For South China Morning Post, Hong Kong protestors as social actor was actively participating through the discourse via material, mental, verbal and relational processes in showing their movements and placements during the protests and criticizing on the issues and protests by loudly vocalizing their thoughts. As a result, both news outlets negatively portrayed the protestors throughout the

news reports.

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