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## Political Participation in Hong Kong: The Roles of News Media and Online Alternative Media

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Different types of media use exert distinctive influences over political participation of various forms. Drawing on the O-S-R-O-R (Orientation–Stimulus–Reasoning–Orientation–Response) model of political communication effects, this study proposes a theoretical model to connect traditional news media use and online alternative media use to both institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation. The framework integrates internal efficacy and political satisfaction as mediators to explain the indirect processes from media use to political participation. Findings from a survey of representative Hong Kong adults suggest that news media use and alternative media use can influence political participation in different ways. Specifically, traditional news media play the role of an efficacy facilitator to boost institutional and noninstitutional political participation, whereas online alternative media mainly serve as a political dissatisfaction amplifier to fuel citizens' noninstitutional political participation, such as protest participation.

*Keywords: news media, online alternative media, political participation, Hong Kong*

In the past two decades, the long-standing assertion about the positive role of media use in facilitating political participation has been challenged by the new development of politics and technologies around the world (J. M. McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). On one hand, the extensive availability of communication technologies creates a high-choice media environment in which people can consume political news from a variety of media outlets (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009; Dubois & Blank, 2018). Exposure to different political information may bring various cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. On the other hand, the repertoire of political participation expands from traditional activities such as voting and donation to a diverse array of activities such as street protests and demonstrations (Bennett, 2012; Ladd, 1999). Thus, it is necessary to investigate the relationships

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between different types of media use and political participation of various forms. Drawing on the O-S-R-O-R (Orientation–Stimulus–Reasoning–Orientation–Response) model (Shah et al., 2007), this study focuses on how traditional news media use and online alternative media use connect to institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation.

This study contributes to extant literature in three ways. First, it compares traditional news media with online alternative media in terms of their influence on political participation. News media and alternative media show different characteristics, although the distinction between them becomes blurred (Kenix, 2011). As previous studies have suggested, traditional news media follow an objective and structured principle in covering news, which is beneficial for citizens to obtain specific information about political participation (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). By contrast, with a close connection with political activists, alternative media are less journalistically professional and more ideologically oriented (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). This feature suggests that alternative media may be effective in arousing strong emotions and encouraging street protests. Yet, much existing research of alternative media focuses on content and production (Atton, 2007) and leaves the effects of use understudied. Recently, a few studies have attended to the relationships between alternative media use and political participation (M. Chan, 2016; Leung & Lee, 2014). There is a need to continue this line of research to explore how the use of online alternative media can influence political participation.

Second, this study examines two different forms of political participation: institutional political participation (e.g., voting) and noninstitutional political participation (e.g., protest participation). Today in many societies, institutional forms of political participation have been decreasing, whereas noninstitutional forms of political participation are increasing (Bennett, 2012). However, most previous research has focused on either one of the two forms of political participation in a single study. By analyzing two forms of political participation together, this study provides more insights into their distinction and similarities.

Furthermore, the study adopts the O-S-R-O-R model of political communication effects to explicate the psychological mechanisms through which media use impinges on political participation (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007). Cognitive and affective motivations are two important driving forces of political participation (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Therefore, this study includes internal efficacy and political satisfaction as potential mediators of media effects. Despite their theoretical importance, their roles as mediators between media use and political participation have not been adequately explored (Li & Chan, 2017). How different media use can influence the two psychological dispositions is less known, especially with regard to alternative media use. Taken together, this study examines an elaborated model linking news media use and online alternative media use to institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation through internal efficacy and political satisfaction.

### **Political Participation**

This study examines two forms of political participation: institutional and noninstitutional political participation. Institutional forms of political participation refer to traditional political engagement such as voting and town hall meeting attendance (J. M. McLeod et al., 1999; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). These activities often take place in a community or a party setting. Participants interact with the political

institution by abiding its regulations. This is why these activities are labeled *institutional political participation* (McVeigh & Smith, 1999). Among them, voting is the most common channel directly connected to election and political power (van Deth, 2001).

In contrast, noninstitutional forms of political participation go beyond normal political channels. They are radical, confrontational, and indirect ways to influence politics (Bennett, 2012). Noninstitutional political participation aims to challenge the authority (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Typical noninstitutional political behaviors include political protests, demonstrations, and Internet activism (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016; Norris, Walgrave, & Van Aelst, 2005).

Both forms of political participation are effective ways to hold government accountable and responsive to the public (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Held, 2006). With the worldwide evolvement of politics, citizens' involvement in institutional activities has been declining, whereas noninstitutional forms of political participation such as protest participation have become prevalent in many societies (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). Such trends suggest the expansion of the repertoire of political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; van Deth, 2001).

If two forms of political participation are different, it should be reasonable to assume that their antecedents are distinct as well. Nevertheless, few studies have included both forms of political participation in a single study (for an exception, see Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Because voting and protest are the most prevalent political activities in many societies (van Deth, 2001), this study treats them as important proxies to the two forms of political participation.

### **News Media Use and Political Participation**

Many factors influence political participation, but media use plays a vital role in engaging citizens in political activities. This idea could be exemplified by the O-S-R-O-R model, which details the intricate connection between media use and political participation (for a review, see Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007).

Previous research has found that traditional news media use positively influences institutional political participation (J. M. McLeod et al., 1999; Norris, 1996). This is mainly because traditional news media such as newspapers and televisions provide necessary information about political activities and help citizens acquire political knowledge (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). News media are the venues where citizens can easily find political information such as dates of elections, venues of hearings, names of representatives, and so forth. A study of four U.S. presidential elections revealed a positive relationship between paying attention to campaign news in newspapers and voting (Weaver & Drew, 2001). Exposure to news media fortifies citizens' political knowledge, fosters their perceived capability to deal with politics, and consequently increases likelihood of political participation (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

In addition to being an important information source of institutional political actions, traditional news media use promotes political participation by reinforcing individuals' affection toward the incumbent

government. As the functional social institution integrated into the dominant political and economic structure in society, traditional news media often have a close affiliation with the authority (Cottle, 2011; Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Almost in every society, media professionals act as constructive partners of the government, and they are disposed to cover news stories supporting national development or conveying a positive image of the leadership (Hanitzsch, 2011). Exposure to favorable news toward the government can generate positive motivation to institutional political participation (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). Thus, we formulated the first research hypothesis:

*H1: Traditional news media use is positively related to institutional forms of political participation such as voting.*

When it comes to noninstitutional forms of political participation such as protest participation, the mechanism could be much different. Traditional news media often provide coverage of protest with a negative tone (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Mosca & Quaranta, 2016; Sullivan, 2016). Existing literature suggests that traditional news media tend to portray political activists and protests in a distorted light so that the biased representation could thwart protest participation to a large extent (Boyle, McCluskey, McLeod, & Stein, 2005). Scholars named such reporting the "protest paradigm" and identified its characteristics such as reliance on official sources and demonization of protesters (for a review, see J. M. Chan & Lee, 1984; D. M. McLeod, 2007). By applying the protest paradigm, news media generally focus on visible drama and conflict, exaggerate threats caused by protesters, and belittle protesters. For instance, in analyzing the coverage of the 2011 protest in Egypt, Harlow and Johnson (2011) observed that *The New York Times* predominantly focused on the drama and the violence of the protests, and employed the frames of injustice and moral outrage to depict protesters, whereas alternative media set a positive tone for protesters' actions. Therefore, we proposed the second hypothesis:

*H2: Traditional news media use is negatively related to noninstitutional forms of political participation such as protest participation.*

### **Online Alternative Media Use and Political Participation**

Because traditional news media incline to underrepresent and misrepresent social protests and their participators, "alternative" newspapers and websites emerged to gratify protesters' need for information that is sympathetic to protests (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Alternative media take various forms in history, from printed newsletters to online websites (Downing, 2001). In recent years, alternative media went online in different societies: the emergence of the Independent Media Center in Western society and Hong Kong In-media in Hong Kong (M. Chan, 2016; Harcup, 2012). Compared with traditional outlets, online alternative news websites operate with lower cost and fewer resources, but reach a wider group of audiences (Thörn, 2007).

The concept of alternative media is complex. Many scholars conceptualize alternative media as oppositional media with an ideological inclination against dominant political power and mainstream media (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Coyer, Dowmunt, & Fountain, 2011). Others argue that alternative media and traditional news media are not mutually exclusive, but they are on a continuum because both media share

similar attributes (for a review, see Kenix, 2011). For example, some alternative media started to pursue professionalized and commercial practices under market pressure, which resembles the operation of traditional news media (Kenix, 2011). Both media sometimes cover the same issue by relying on each other's resources (Fenton, 2007). In terms of political inclination, alternative media are not necessarily the polar opposite of traditional news media. Some alternative media hold an extremely radical stance, but some have a relatively moderate political inclination.

Still, alternative media and traditional news media are distinct in some ways. Compared with traditional news media, alternative media are less commercially oriented and more ideologically driven (Christians et al., 2009; Kenix, 2011). Such distinct characteristics of alternative media are related to their intertwined connection with social protest groups and political activists. The stigmatized political activists make use of alternative media as an important vehicle to construct social realities in a radical way, to express their grievance toward the dominant political system, and to make them "visible" (Ryan, Carragee, & Schwerner, 1998). As a result, alternative media usually offer much proprotest information and have a critical tone toward hegemonic political power.

That said, alternative media use is able to influence citizens' noninstitutional forms of political participation, particularly protest participation. First, specific information about protest participation marginalized in news media could be easily accessible in alternative media (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). This is because many alternative media are under the charge of political activists and protest groups (Christians et al., 2009; Haas, 2004). During the Trade Union Movement in Britain in 2007, protest groups informed citizens of protest activities and mobilized them to join the campaign through alternative media outlets (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Alternative media exposure can boost protest participation by cultivating oppositional consciousness, an empowering mental state against the established dominance (Mansbridge, 2001). F. L. Lee (2015a) further elaborates the term *oppositional consciousness* by identifying negative emotions toward the dominant political and economic power and "people's understanding of concepts that are central to oppositional discourses or contentious political actions" (p. 322) as important components of oppositional consciousness. Negative considerations toward the authority provide a breeding ground for critical attitudes against mainstream discourses and dominant systems, so that the audiences of alternative media are encouraged to join protests (Rodriguez, 2001). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

*H3: Online alternative media use is positively related to noninstitutional forms of political participation such as protest participation.*

### **Psychological Mediators**

In the O-S-R-O-R model, the second O refers to psychological orientations that explicate mechanisms connecting media use to political participation (Shah et al., 2007). Identifying specific psychological factors is of great importance to having a fuller account of the theoretical mechanisms. For this reason, Cho and his colleagues (2009) call for more research to explore "especially the second O" (p. 81). Responding to such an appeal, previous studies have proposed explanatory models to ascertain the impacts of psychological antecedents to political participation. For instance, the social identity model of

collective action argues that social identity, injustice, and efficacy are three important motivators of protest participation (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Similarly, the Gamson hypothesis points out that low political trust and high self-efficacy lead to noninstitutional forms of political activities (Gamson, 1968). Scholars also assert that high trust and high self-efficacy can contribute to institutional forms of political activities such as voting (Bandura, 1982). Moreover, the cognitive mediation model suggests that media use produces political outcomes through cognitive processes (Eveland, 2001).

All of these models suggest that at the individual level, citizens are more inclined to participate in political activities through activating cognitive and affective motivators. Internal efficacy is one of the most important driving forces of political participation because people's perceptions of their ability to understand and influence politics can prompt their willingness to attend to and take part in political activities (Delli Carpini, 2004; Gamson, 1992; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Political satisfaction, individuals' affective evaluations of political outcomes such as government actions, constitutes another affective antecedent to political participation given that it influences citizens' reactions to existing political institutions (Anderson, 1998; Anderson & Guillory, 1997). Although internal efficacy and political satisfaction are two important psychological factors, their roles in mediating media effects on political participation have been underexamined. For instance, how different media outlets can strengthen or weaken the two psychological motivators receives less scholarly attention, especially with regard to alternative media. In addition, the meaning of political satisfaction is closely intertwined with those of political trust and political affection (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007). Much effort has been put into exploring political trust and political affection (e.g., Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014), but there is limited research on the interplay among media use, political satisfaction, and political participation. Therefore, this study aims to contribute more insights into the O-S-R-O-R model by concentrating on the role of internal efficacy and political satisfaction as second orientations mediating media use and political participation.

### ***Internal Efficacy***

In political science, internal efficacy refers to the feeling of self-competence to understand politics and to influence the political process (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Zimmerman, 1989). Internal efficacy serves as a cognitive stimulus of political participation (Klandermans, 1984; Moeller, de Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014). If individuals have a high level of internal efficacy, they are more likely to perceive the benefit of political participation to outweigh the cost and believe that they can positively influence the outcome of the political process. Such belief motivates them to engage in different political activities. Efficacious citizens are active participants in both institutional and noninstitutional forms of political activities, such as voting, petition, demonstration, and so forth (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011).

Among various communication practices, media use plays an influential role on internal efficacy (Johnson & Kaye, 2009; T. T. Lee, 2005). News media use, especially newspaper reading, has been found to increase internal efficacy. Exposure to news media helps citizens be familiar with political affairs, analyze political issues, and acquire political knowledge, all leading to higher confidence in participating in politics (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). For instance, a three-wave panel survey in the Netherlands revealed that traditional news media use promotes individuals' belief in understanding politics (Moeller et al., 2014).

However, the question of how alternative media influence internal efficacy is less clear because few studies have explored the relationship between alternative media and internal efficacy. Exposure to alternative news information in alternative media may help citizens gain knowledge of political and social issues, and subsequently confidence in participation. Alternative media also serve as a public sphere in which users can post and comment on news and discuss it with other users (Yung & Leung, 2014). Such communicative and interactive processes encourage sophisticated information processing and elaborative expression, which could boost individuals' internal efficacy (Shah et al., 2005).

### ***Political Satisfaction***

As political satisfaction is an affective evaluation toward existing political institutions, it heavily relies on the distribution of positive or negative information about political institutions (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that news media often provide positive news about governments, which shapes citizens' favorable evaluation of existing political system. Constant exposure to news in legacy media increases the level of satisfaction toward the authority among citizens (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Scholars have identified a negative association between television news viewing and political dissatisfaction (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). Similarly, Johnson and Kaye (2013) showed that news media exposure reinforced individuals' satisfaction toward the government. However, other studies have found evidence that news media use sometimes undermined citizens' faith in politicians and governments, and made people become less satisfied with political institutions (Owen, 1999). Scholars attribute such mixed findings to different relationships between news media and political institutions (Chadwick, 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The positive media effect on political satisfaction is more likely to occur when there exists a symbiotic relationship between media organizations and political institutions (Chadwick, 2017). On the contrary, if news media play an adversary role opposing the government, exposure to news media can have a negative effect on political satisfaction. Similar to the latter scenario, many online alternative media produce negative news including scandals of politicians, misconduct of the government, and criticism toward social problems (Haas, 2004). Exposure to such information cultivates citizens' oppositional consciousness, inducing a low level of political satisfaction toward political institutions (Mansbridge, 2001). Therefore, alternative media use is expected to lower political satisfaction.

Political satisfaction leads to varying impacts on political participation. On one hand, high levels of political satisfaction can consolidate the stability of political systems and facilitate institutional forms of political participation (Anderson & Guillory, 1997). Citizens with high levels of political satisfaction have more confidence in governments and politicians, and they are more willing to participate in institutional political activities such as voting and attending hearings to show their recognition of and their support for the incumbent regime (Hetherington & Husser, 2012).

In contrast, low levels of political satisfaction among citizens can cause serious threats to political stability (Stipak, 1979). When citizens have low levels of political satisfaction, one direct way to vent dissatisfaction is to protest on the street (M. Chan, 2016). Once no further favorable response comes from the government, citizens will feel disillusioned and they may undermine or even overthrow the political institution (Johnson & Kaye, 2013).

To summarize, the above discussion describes two potential pathways from media use to political participation: through internal efficacy and political satisfaction. Therefore, we addressed the following two research questions:

*RQ1: To what extent does internal efficacy mediate the relationships between different media use and institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation (i.e., voting and protest participation)?*

*RQ2: To what extent does political satisfaction mediate the relationships between different media use and institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation (i.e., voting and protest participation)?*

### **Study Context: Hong Kong**

This study was contextualized in Hong Kong, a society in which citizens enthusiastically interact with the political system in different ways through voting, online expression, and street protests. Although universal suffrage has yet to be introduced in Hong Kong, the electoral system still provides citizens with the opportunities to vote for representatives in the District Council elections and the Legislative Council elections (F. L. Lee, 2002). Beyond the traditional methods of political participation, active citizens seek alternative ways to influence politics. The city of Hong Kong has a long history of prodemocracy movements (Leung & Lee, 2014). Protest participation is the most common practice of noninstitutional political engagement.

The media in Hong Kong are shaped by complicated political interplays between the public and the government. Although the media system in Hong Kong exhibits a certain degree of autonomy and diversity under the principle of "one country two systems," the Chinese government attempts to exercise influence over Hong Kong media by providing political and economic incentives (F. L. Lee & Chan, 2009). As a whole, the news media in Hong Kong gradually tilt toward the proestablishment side after its handover from the United Kingdom to China in 1997 (Fung, 2007). In the past decade, online alternative media emerged. The development of alternative media was driven by public distrust in traditional news media to be indirectly controlled by the Chinese government and by the revitalization of prodemocracy movements in Hong Kong (Leung, Tsoi, & Ma, 2011). At the time of this study, there were eight prominent prodemocracy online alternative news sites and one weak proestablishment alternative news site in Hong Kong. The eight prodemocracy online alternative sites were VJ Media, Passion Times, Post 852, Dash, Memehk, Local Press, Hong Kong Citizens' Media, and Initium Media. The proestablishment online alternative site was the Bastille Post. All of them closely identify themselves with social advocates. Given such media ecology and political environment, Hong Kong constitutes a suitable case to study the impact of alternative media on political participation.

## Method

### Data

The data analyzed in the study were collected from an online survey of Hong Kong adults conducted by international market research firm YouGov. The survey was fielded between late November and December 2015, one week shortly after the 2015 Hong Kong District Council election. The sample consisted of 1,057 Hong Kong citizens age 18 years or older, and the response rate was 19%. Hong Kong census statistics regarding gender, age, education, and income were used for quota sampling. To make the respondents more representative of the Hong Kong population, we weighted the data set by gender and age before statistical analysis.

### Measurements

#### *Traditional News Media Use*

To measure traditional news media use, the survey asked respondents to report the frequencies of informational use of three media outlets including newspapers ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), radio ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), and television ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) on a 5-point scale where 0 denoted *never* and 4 denoted *every day*. The overall frequency of news media use was obtained by averaging the three items ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

#### *Online Alternative Media Use*

Online alternative media use was the main independent variable of interest. We first asked respondents to indicate whether they had used the nine aforementioned alternative news websites in Hong Kong. We used a 10-point scale to measure online alternative media use frequency. However, it turned out that only a small portion of respondents (3.7%) used one or some of the nine alternative news websites. Therefore, we recoded online alternative media use into a dummy variable where 1 indicated using alternative news websites and 0 not using ( $M = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ).

#### *Internal Efficacy*

Three questions such as "Do you think you are well informed about politics?" were employed to measure individuals' internal efficacy on a 4-point scale where 0 indicated *low level of internal efficacy* and 3 indicated *high level of internal efficacy*. An index of internal efficacy was formulated by averaging the three questions ( $\alpha = .67$ ,  $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

#### *Political Satisfaction*

Political satisfaction was operationalized by two questions. The first question asked respondents' satisfaction perception about the degree of democracy of the political system in Hong Kong. Answers were recorded by a 4-point scale spanning from 0 (*not satisfied with the degree of democracy*) to 3 (*very*

*satisfied with the degree of democracy*) ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). The second question was about to what extent respondents were satisfied with the Hong Kong government, and respondents indicated their level of satisfaction on a 4-point scale that ranged from *not satisfied at all* to *very satisfied* ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). An index was created by averaging these two items ( $r = .67$ ,  $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ).

#### *Political Participation*

Both institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation were examined. Institutional political participation was measured by asking whether respondents had voted in the 2015 Hong Kong District Council election (yes = 48.5%). Noninstitutional political participation was measured by asking whether respondents had taken part in protests in the past year on a 3-point scale ranging from *never* to *often* ( $M = 0.17$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ).

#### *Control Variables*

A number of demographic and party support variables were included as controls. About 45.4% of respondents were men. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 83 years old ( $M = 44.21$  years,  $SD = 14.70$ ). About 41.4% of respondents had received a diploma or degree from universities. Monthly household income was measured as an ordinal variable with seven brackets varying from HKD 9,999 or below to HKD 60,000 or above ( $Mdn = 4$ , HKD 30,000–39,999). Party support was measured by asking respondents the extent to which they support their affiliated party on a 4-point scale ( $M = 0.38$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ).

### **Findings**

To test research hypotheses and explore research questions, we performed ordinary least squares regression to analyze two psychological factor models and logistic regression analysis to analyze the binary voting variable. Because the distribution of protest participation variable was positively skewed (skewness = 2.18) and the one-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test confirmed that the frequency distribution of variable followed a Poisson distribution ( $z = .24$ ,  $p > .05$ ), we performed Poisson regressions to test our hypotheses. Results are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Hypothesis 1 hypothesized that traditional news media use would be positively related to voting. As shown in Table 2, news media use was positively associated with voting ( $b = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and news media use was directly related to voting even after the two psychological variables entered the model (Model 2:  $b = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 assumed that there would be a negative relationship between traditional news media use and protest participation. Contrary to our expectation, the result suggested that news media use was positively related to protest participation ( $b = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Hypothesis 3 posited a positive connection between online alternative media use and protest participation. As shown in Table 2, alternative media use positively predicted protest participation ( $b = .47$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

**Table 1. Impacts of Media Use on Internal Efficacy and Political Satisfaction.**

Variable	Internal efficacy		Political satisfaction	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Media use				
Traditional news media	.15***	.02	-.03	.02
Online alternative media	.06	.10	-.24*	.12
Controls				
Gender	-.20***	.04	-.06	.05
Age	.00	.00	.00	.00
Education	.06***	.01	-.07***	.02
Household income	.02	.01	.04**	.01
Party support	.15***	.02	.04	.03
Constant	1.53***	0.13	1.57***	0.11
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	19.3***		3.6***	

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2. Predicting Voting and Protest Participation.**

Variable	Voting				Protest participation			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Media use								
News media	.25***	.07	.14*	.07	.31***	.07	.17*	.07
Online alternative media	.10	.37	.09	.38	.47#	.26	.23	.27
Psychological mediators								
Internal efficacy			.86***	.13			.90***	.12
Political satisfaction			.17	.11			-.23*	.10
Controls								
Gender	-.38**	.14	-.22	.15	-.11	.14	.03	.14
Age	.00	.01	.01	.01	-.03***	.01	-.03***	.01
Education	.06	.05	.02	.05	.09#	.05	.03	.04
Household income	.01	.04	-.01	.05	.03	.05	.03	.05
Party support	.72***	.10	.62***	.11	.27***	.07	.12	.08
Constant	-0.61	0.40	-2.23***	0.50	-1.61***	0.41	-2.72***	0.49
-2 Log likelihood	1207.91		1160.29					
Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$					80.83		156.01	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (%)	13.7***		19.6***		7.6***		12.4***	

Note. Entries are logistic regression (logit) coefficients in voting models, and Poisson regression coefficients in protest participation models. *R*<sup>2</sup> entries are Nagelkerke *R*<sup>2</sup> in voting models and pseudo-*R*<sup>2</sup> in protest participation models.

#*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Research Questions 1 and 2 investigated how internal efficacy and political satisfaction can account for the relationships between media use and political participation. Results in Table 1 reveal that news media use was positively associated with internal efficacy ( $b = .15, p < .001$ ). Online alternative media use was negatively related to citizens' satisfaction toward the government ( $b = -.24, p < .05$ ). Regarding the paths linking psychological factors to political participation, logistic and Poisson regression analyses were conducted, and results are presented in Table 2. It turns out that internal efficacy predicted both voting ( $b = .86, p < .001$ ) and protest participation ( $b = .90, p < .001$ ). Political satisfaction was negatively related to protest participation only ( $b = -.23, p < .05$ ).

Given complexity of our mediation models,<sup>2</sup> this study followed the causal steps approach to make statistical inference regarding indirect effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986). News media use showed significant indirect effects on voting and protest participation through increasing the level of internal efficacy. Online alternative media use had an indirect effect over protest participation through political satisfaction.

## Discussion

This study explored the roles of news media use and online alternative media use in predicting different forms of political participation. In an attempt to explicate the mechanisms underlying the media effects on political participation, we examined the mediating role of internal efficacy and political satisfaction under the O-S-R-O-R framework. Our study yielded some interesting findings worthy of discussion.

### ***Traditional News Media as Efficacy Facilitators***

First, echoing findings from existing research, we found that news media use promotes voting participation. Participation in institutional political activities works with the logic of the mainstream political system. However, the findings revealed that traditional news media use was positively related to protest participation as well. One plausible explanation is that in Hong Kong traditional news media do not strictly adhere to the protest paradigm when covering protest activities. This is because some news media in Hong Kong possess a proliberal ideology (Fung, 2007). In addition, public opinion toward political protests matters. According to several surveys fielded during the recent protests in Hong Kong, many residents hold a supportive attitude toward political protests (P. S. Lee, So, & Leung, 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014). Insisting on the absolute equality and freedom of all citizens in society, news media with a radical orientation seek to help people who are opposed to the authority because they are underrepresented or disenfranchised (Christians et al., 2009). Therefore, exposure to prodemocracy news media can potentially increase the likelihood of protest participation.

By examining potential mediators, the findings revealed one possible mechanism through which news media use links to political participation: internal efficacy. News media could inform people of

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<sup>2</sup> Ordinary least squares regression analyses were conducted for the psychological factor models. Logistic regression analyses and Poisson regression analyses were conducted for the political participation models.

various political affairs. Informed citizens are prone to feel more capable of understanding politics and being politically internally efficacious, which in turn encourages them to participate in different political activities (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Nevertheless, we found that political satisfaction did not statistically mediate the relationship between news media use and political participation ( $b = -.03$ , *n.s.*). This finding relates to the broad political spectrum of news media in Hong Kong. News media with a proestablishment political stance usually maintain close ties with the Chinese central government. By contrast, prodemocracy news media devote more space to negative news toward the political system (J. M. Chan & Lee, 2007). In a rich media environment, the viewers would construct their news repertoire by consuming news from media organizations with different political stances rather than confine news exposure to one specific medium (Yuan, 2011). Exposure to conflicting information induces ambivalence (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004), a mixture of positive and negative attitude toward the government.

### ***Alternative Media as Political Dissatisfaction Amplifiers***

Second, we found that alternative media use led to protest participation. Alternative media play an educational and mobilizing role to protest participation (M. Chan, 2016; Christians et al., 2009). Favorable content toward protest participants can also make alternative media users sympathize with them, provoking protest participation. However, such causal relationship cannot be taken for granted in a cross-sectional study, although many argue that media use is a critical antecedent to political participation (Jung et al., 2011; Norris, 2000). It is possible that in Hong Kong, online alternative media attract audiences that are already predisposed to protest participation. Therefore, a more plausible interpretation is that there exists a reciprocal relationship between prodemocracy alternative media use and protest participation. More important, alternative media use exhibits an indirect effect on protest participation by cultivating citizens' political dissatisfaction but not political efficacy. Such a finding seems to be consistent with some scholars' judgment that alternative media are more likely to arouse users' emotion toward the political institution, but make a small difference to individuals' feeling of self-competence regarding understanding politics (M. Chan, 2016).

It should be noted that the capability of alternative media to influence protest participation and the growth of online alternative news websites in Hong Kong benefit from a relatively free Internet environment. Different from the Internet in Mainland China, the Internet in Hong Kong is not subject to the sophisticated censorship or restriction of information flow, which provides a breeding ground for online alternative media sites. However, one should not be that optimistic about the development and the impact of online alternative media in Hong Kong because serious challenges indeed remain.

Foremost, political interference may cause trouble to online alternative media. As the Chinese government tightens media control in Hong Kong, it is possible that the freedom of information flow on the Internet will shrink (Lai, 2007; Tsui, 2015). More recently, proestablishment alternative news websites such as the Silent Majority for Hong Kong have arisen. Although these conservative alternative media are not popular among Hong Kong audience, it remains to be seen whether a growing number of conservative alternative news sites will offset the impacts of prodemocracy alternative media. In addition, economic sustainability is another challenge. Some alternative news websites, for instance, The House News, have been shut down because of financial hardship. The political stance of alternative media prevents them

from attracting much advertising revenue. Moreover, compared with traditional news media, the audience size of online alternative media in Hong Kong is rather small despite the high penetration rate of the Internet (Leung & Lee, 2014). This study also provides a piece of empirical evidence that only 3.7% of the public in Hong Kong are frequent users of alternative news websites.

To conclude, we examined the effects of internal efficacy and political satisfaction mediating the relationship between media use and political participation (see feature summary in Table 3). By doing so, our study discovered the distinctive roles of news media and online alternative media in predicting different political participation. Traditional news media work as an efficacy facilitator to encourage political participation, whereas online alternative media use leads to noninstitutional political participation through heightening levels of political dissatisfaction. Alternative media serve as a political dissatisfaction amplifier to fuel citizens' protest participation. News media and online alternative media together constitute a pluralistic media environment in which individuals are exposed to a variety of information and they serve different roles for political participation (Kenix, 2011).

**Table 3. Summary of Media Effects on Psychological Mediators and Political Participation.**

Variable	News media use	Alternative media use
Psychological and behavioral outcomes		
Internal efficacy	Positive	No
Political satisfaction	No	Negative
Institutional political participation		
Direct effect	Positive	No
Indirect effect		
Through internal efficacy	Positive	No
Through political satisfaction	No	No
Noninstitutional political participation		
Direct effect	Positive	No
Indirect effect		
Through internal efficacy	Positive	No
Through political satisfaction	No	Positive

*Note.* The effects indicate the unique effects of a certain media use on psychological and behavioral outcomes when controlling for another media use in regression models. *Positive* denotes positive effects, *negative* denotes negative effects, and *no* denotes insignificant effects.

### **Limitations**

Admittedly, this study has a few limitations. First, as noted before, the cross-sectional design of this study limits our confidence in interpreting relationship between media use and political participation to be causal relationship. To argue for a causal relationship, further research needs more rigorous research design, such as using panel surveys. Second, the two core dependent variables in this study were operationalized using single items. Single-item measures cannot warrant a great high measurement validity, which can somehow influence the robustness of the results. It is important to note, however, that

many existing studies on political participation use single-item measures as dependent variables (e.g., using the single item to measure voting: Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Eveland, Song, & Beck, 2015; F. L. Lee, 2015a; using the single item to measure protest participation: M. Chan, 2016; F. L. Lee, 2015b).

Third, our hypotheses about media effects were based on our understanding of different features of news content from mainstream news media and online alternative media. Obviously, we did not do a systematic content analysis to show the content difference. The content difference between mainstream and alternative media can actually vary across societies. Finally and relatedly, researchers need to be cautious when generalizing our finding from Hong Kong to other parts of the world to the extent that Hong Kong is a society with unique political and cultural settings. Nevertheless, we believe that our findings from Hong Kong do have implications for other societies because what we discovered is consistent with findings from elsewhere in the world. For example, we found that traditional news media use can increase political efficacy and subsequently institutional and noninstitutional forms of political participation. Similar findings have been observed in other societies. One study from the Netherlands found that newspaper reading had a strong impact on young citizens' internal efficacy, which further contributed to voting turnout (see Moeller et al., 2014). Another study conducted in the United States found that news media use led to both traditional political participation and protest participation (see Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). For another example, we found that online alternative media serve as a political dissatisfaction amplifier to fuel citizens' protest participation. This result echoes the fact that the development of alternative media and social movements was highly intertwined in many Western societies (see Downing, 1988; Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

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