

# Political Consumerism in Hong Kong: China's Economic Intervention, Identity Politics, or Political Participation?

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the recent emergence of political consumerism in Hong Kong. Given its potential implications, we document the origin and maturation of this development and theoretically explain political consumerism from three perspectives: as a response to China's economic intervention, as a form of identity politics, and as a new form of political participation. Drawing on original data collected from a representative survey of the local population, supplemented by interviews with stakeholders from the pro-democracy economic circle, we found that people who opposed China-Hong Kong economic integration and expressed a strong local (as opposed to national) identity tended to support boycotting. People who engaged in political consumerism were active in both legal and radical protests, pointing to the complementary nature of these different forms of activism. Further, by adopting a mediation analysis, we find that support towards the Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement only partially mediate the effect of the factors on political consumerism, suggesting that they are distinct development despite their shared origins. This article provides a novel perspective on the political polarisation in Hong Kong among consumer markets.

**KEYWORDS:** political consumerism, political participation, Chinese investment, Hong Kong.

The Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB) in 2019 was undoubtedly the most significant social movement in post-handover Hong Kong. Its unprecedented scale could be shown from the fact that around 40% of the Hong Kong population took part in the movement, with more than 9,000 people arrested from June 2019 to June 2020 (Cheng *et al.* forthcoming). Although the protests seemed to have lost momentum in 2020 due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Anti-ELAB Movement could prove to be a watershed for the sociopolitical landscape of Hong Kong. This article focuses on a novel politico-economic aspect of the movement: the development of political consumerism. The "yellow economic circle"<sup>1</sup> has received a strong reception from those who sympathise with the movement and, with no less intensity, among pro-government supporters and officials. In this study, we focus on four research questions: (1) What factors lead to the development of political consumerism? (2) What are the major patterns of political consumerist activities? (3) What is the relationship between political consumerism and other forms of political participation? (4) What is the relationship between the Anti-ELAB Movement and political consumerism?

To answer these questions, this study adopts several analytical approaches. First, it analyses two forms of political consumerism: boycotts (*bamai* 罷買, refraining from consumption for social/political reasons)

and "buycotts" (*baomai* 爆買, literally "explosive buying"). Second, we capture the frequency of action and the level of support involved, allowing us to distinguish between its popularity as a general idea and its prevalence as an action that incurs costs. Third, this study contrasts the support for political consumerism with that for the Anti-ELAB Movement and examines its correlation with other forms of political participation. Fourth, we demonstrate how support towards the Anti-ELAB Movement partially mediates the effect of personal background and beliefs on political consumerism. This study adopts a mixed-methods design with data collected from a representative survey of the local population, supplemented by qualitative interviews with stakeholders of the pro-democracy economic circle.

This study makes the following contributions. First, despite its recent emergence, political consumerism is not a "niche" activity or one that is exclusive to young people; rather, it is a widespread phenomenon that has the potential to alter the political landscape of Hong Kong. For instance, 83.5% of our survey respondents (detailed below) had heard of this development, including more than 96% of those younger than 24 years

1. Yellow has been associated with pro-democracy movements since the Umbrella Movement, as opposed to blue, which is used by pro-government supporters.

old. This finding highlights the need to understand such behaviours in a more methodologically rigorous manner. Second, this study provides an additional economic element to the turbulence in Hong Kong. Although it is not novel to trace the economic origins of its political problems, the economic incentives of individuals are seldom explored. We document a bottom-up attempt by people to fight for their ideals not only on the streets but also in their daily lives. As an idea inherently at odds with the rhetoric of government leaders emphasising stability and prosperity and calling for matters not to be “politicised,” political consumerism should be a point of contention in the ongoing fight for the city’s future.

## Literature review

Political consumerism is defined as “market-oriented engagements emerging from societal concerns” (Bostrom *et al.* 2019: 2), with the ultimate purpose of facilitating social change (e.g. environmental standards, LGBT rights) by expressing political preferences through purchasing power (Zúñiga *et al.* 2014). In many Western democracies, political consumerism is actually the most widespread form of political participation, followed by voting (van Deth 2012). Under authoritarian regimes, given the tighter control, political consumerism has taken a distinctly narrower form because consumer choices remain structured by government measures, and political activity is limited to issues tolerated by the state (Reilly 2014). As suggested by Stromsnes (2009), political consumerism supplements traditional forms of participation and extends the conventional repertoire. Similarly, Balsiger (2010: 326) regards it as a part of the “tactical action repertoire,” consisting of protests, conventional, and consumerist actions.

Two major forms of political consumerism are identified in the literature. Consumer boycott simply refers to the refusal to consume certain products due to political considerations. However, activists sometimes find these actions problematic given the difficulty in identifying targets and the balance of benefits and harm (e.g. to workers’ livelihoods). Therefore, “buycotts,” defined as the effort to “consume products from an organisation because the organisation reflects their values” (Nonomura 2017: 235), have been actively promoted in recent decades. As buycotts usually go hand-in-hand with discursive forms of political consumerism, the yellow economic circle conforms with this development, with an established ideological belief system and extensive networks and platforms. However, despite the greater tendency to differentiate between buycotts and boycotts in the literature, to our knowledge not a lot of work has been done to identify the respective factors of each type of action.

As a supplement to traditional participation, political consumerism emphasises interaction with other forms of mobilisation and the reinforcement of public debates. The first objective is to build a collective ideology. Political consumerism empowers individuals to assign a subjective political meaning and purpose to their purchasing decisions. Supporters create a collective political character and develop consistency between ideologies, attitudes, and consumer action against their opponents (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). Second, to consume in one manner or another is connected to an individual’s political identity (Zorell 2019). As collective identity has become more important in mobilisation, proponents use diverse marketing strategies to appeal to consumers’ desire for solidarity and link consumption to their identity construction. The idea is that supporters need to perceive that they are acting in line

with a certain political obligation to uphold a consistent identity, and this influences their intentions to engage in political consumerism.

More critically for Hong Kong, whether political consumerism strengthens a social movement (and vice versa) is of significance. Some studies argue that social movements facilitate political consumerism with their potential to cultivate social bonds and solidarity (Forno and Graziano 2014), as well as constructing mutual aid networks in times of economic crisis (Andretta and Guidi 2017). Conversely, political consumerism may have a limited effect on social movements, as its impact is more on civic participation (e.g. signing petition) than on political participation (e.g. protesting) (Ward and de Vreese 2011). Although a number of studies have been done on this topic, the relationship between political consumerism and social movements is still unclear (Newman and Bartels 2011; Bossy 2014).

## Development of political consumerism in Hong Kong

Political consumerism in Hong Kong arguably first emerged during the Umbrella Movement in 2014. During that occupation, one individual, later identified as the owner of a restaurant, confronted a female protester and his restaurant was consequently targeted for a boycott. Furthermore, realising that support for the movement might dissipate if the occupation affected neighbouring businesses, a form of buycotting was suggested as protesters set up guides to encourage people to visit neighbouring businesses and restaurants to mitigate their losses. Although these actions remained on a small scale, they were distinctive in that they were tied to an ongoing social movement and were aimed at using economic incentives to further its goals. This marked the onset of the form of political consumerism that we examine here.

The Anti-ELAB Movement started in June 2019 as a response to the government’s proposal to amend the “Extradition Bill,” which would allow fugitives to be transferred to jurisdictions with which Hong Kong has no extradition agreement in place, most notably Mainland China, triggering a strong reaction across society due to the fear of erosion of human rights protections. Although the initial protest with a turnout of 1.03 million people on 9 June failed to extract any concessions from the government, a subsequent standoff between police and protesters forced the Chief Executive to reluctantly “suspend” the proposal. The response, however, was too little, too late; the damage had already been done, with widespread dissatisfaction over the belated response, the refusal to formally retract the proposal, and the disproportionate force used by the police in handling protesters. Hundreds of bottom-up actions of various scales followed in subsequent months (e.g. Cheng *et al.* forthcoming; Ting 2020). As the movement drew on, protesters began to diversify their actions by integrating protest activities into their daily lives. For instance, gatherings were organised during lunch hours in business districts; strikes were also organised on various occasions (the “three suspensions” or 三罷 *sanba*, labour strikes, and class and market suspension).

Later, a campaign of the exact opposite nature was suggested, encouraging people to patronise “yellow shops” on 10 October to support the movement. This marked the start of a systematic effort to identify and classify yellow shops (and a corresponding list for boycotting). These lists were widely circulated on social media platforms and later even through mobile applications specifically designed for this purpose. As the movement went on and met with the outbreak of the coronavirus, many sympathisers saw these politicised consumer activities as a viable alternative for extending the movement (Chung 2020). The “yellow

economic circle,” as the idea came to be called, has become a sensation that even caught the attention of the international media.<sup>2</sup> For example, *The Guardian* described the effort as the protesters’ move to “weaponise purchasing power.”<sup>3</sup>

Although the initial framework of the circle seemed rudimentary, the idea quickly caught the imagination of people from all walks of life. A conference was organised for academics and intellectuals to discuss its principles, potential difficulties, and solutions.<sup>4</sup> Economists further suggested that a form of cryptocurrency could be used to segregate the circle from the rest of the economy, enhancing solidarity and reducing transaction costs.<sup>5</sup> To better identify the affiliation of businesses, there has also been discussion of establishing a label similar to the Fair Trade label,<sup>6</sup> which is in line with practices of political consumerism elsewhere (Boström 2019).

### Potential impact and social response

How effective is the strategy of political consumerism? An example of its apparent success was its boycotting potential (Chung 2020). The Fulum Group, which was regarded as a “flagship” blue restaurant for boycott, suffered huge losses during the social unrest (with many shops forced to close down).<sup>7</sup> Fulum’s value dropped by half, from 770 million HKD to less than 360 million HKD in May 2020. Meanwhile, the proponents of the “yellow economic circle” organised a campaign called “Hongkonger’s 5.1 Golden Week” to promote spending at yellow shops during the week of 1 May 2020 (echoing Anti-ELAB Movement’s slogan “Five Demands, Not One Less”). Based on an estimate from the organisers, the campaign mobilised more than 400,000 consumers and brought more than a hundred million HKD in revenue to about 2,300 yellow shops.<sup>8</sup>

Although the long-term effects remain to be seen, the government’s strong response was indicative of its perception of the circle as a threat. While the idea was still in its infancy, Edward Yau, the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, challenged it by suggesting that any segregated economy is self-defeating and segregation based on political values does not sit well with the success of Hong Kong based on openness.<sup>9</sup> Similar criticisms have been echoed by pro-government legislators<sup>10</sup> and the state media.<sup>11</sup> The Liaison Office in Hong Kong condemned the “5.1 Golden Week” campaign as a “political kidnap of the economy” (*zhengzhi bangjia jingji* 政治綁架經濟).<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, these criticisms strengthened the supporters’ belief in the potential of the idea in achieving a breakthrough.

Given the infancy of the idea, academic studies on this topic are still not plentiful. An exception is Chan and Pun (2020), who argued that the protesters’ experience during the Anti-ELAB Movement led them to recognise the limits of street protests and strikes. On-site surveys administered by Francis Lee during the Anti-ELAB Movement protests found that 80.3% of the respondents felt that the economic circle would place the pro-government camp under great pressure, and that those between 26–40 were the most likely to put faith in the strategy.<sup>13</sup> Another telephone survey conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies (HKIAPS) found that close to half (49.5%) of respondents would not consider a shop’s political affiliation (as opposed to 38.5% who would), and only 11.2% approved of protests against shops based on political stance (HKIAPS 2020). The reason for the difference is clearly the respondents’ background (protesters vs. general population). However, another reason might be that the latter only focuses negatively on boycotting, whereas people might react more favourably toward positive actions (buycotts). This study focuses on both types of actions to gauge the level of support for political consumerism among the general population.

### Theoretical perspectives

Based on the above literature review, the development of political consumerism can be analysed from three perspectives: (1) collective ideology, (2) collective identity, and (3) a new/alternative form of political participation. In applying these perspectives, we discuss how political consumerism can be viewed as a response to China’s economic intervention, as a struggle between local and national identities, and as a novel form of participation.

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## Response to China's economic interventions and influence

As a special administrative region of China, Hong Kong is promised a high degree of autonomy. In recent decades, it has been suggested that China has become adept at manipulating economic interests to achieve political objectives, both in Hong Kong and around the world (Wong 2018). The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often seen as China's bid to forge a new geopolitical landscape with political motives (Zhou and Esteban 2018). In line with this perspective, "sharp power" is used to denote how authoritarian countries exert political and cultural influence abroad through media outlets, and educational and cultural initiatives (Walker 2018). Economic leverage is applied to get others, including media outlets (Brady 2015) and even foreign university presses (Wong and Kwong 2019), to play by Chinese rules. This strategy has also been used on Hong Kong media outlets, which have gradually been taken over by Chinese capital (Cheung 2018).

Indeed, Mainland China's influence has been apparent across all sectors of Hong Kong's economy. The influence comes directly through acquisitions by Chinese capital or flows of investment, or indirectly by bringing major capitalists and businesspeople into line. Hung (2018) labels this as a form of China's "state capitalism" operating in Hong Kong, whereas others refer to the phenomenon as "assimilationist economic incorporation" (Fong 2017). Since the 2000s, Chinese firms led by state-owned enterprises have increased their investments in Hong Kong (Fong 2014). The signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement in 2003 further accelerated Hong Kong's economic dependence on the mainland by providing local businesses with greater access to China's market, and vice versa (Ma 2015).

The economic dependence of Hong Kong provides China with the leverage to influence the former's business sector. Beijing also has singled out Hong Kong's capitalists as prime targets for co-optation, as they were consistently the dominant group of Hong Kong delegates to state institutions such as the National People's Congress (Fong 2014). On the other hand, many businesses are simply driven by the sheer size of the Chinese market. The dilemma faced by Cathay Pacific is a case in point. As an international airline listed and based in Hong Kong, despite the losses caused by the cancellation of flights, it was originally protective of the employees who took part in the Anti-ELAB Movement. Both its chairperson and CEO later resigned under pressure from the Chinese aviation authority, which had the power to shut down all of its mainland routes, potentially affecting as many as 70% of its flights (Chan and Pun 2020). As a clear gesture to Beijing, several leaders of the labour union were later sacked,<sup>14</sup> along with dozens of staff members who voiced their support on personal social media platforms.<sup>15</sup>

Similar shifts can be seen from many international companies in Hong Kong. For example, at the early stage of the movement, many banks and accounting firms exercised flexibility in work arrangements (thus implicitly allowing employees to take part in strikes), but their positions hardened as the wind turned. In two articles published in *Global Times* (a Chinese official publication), the "Big Four" (accounting firms) were urged to lay off staff who supported the movement and warned that they had to "make their positions known to the public if they want to practice in China."<sup>16</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers, which has the largest market share in the Greater China region, duly complied and condemned the protests.<sup>17</sup> This trend continued beyond the Anti-ELAB Movement; major international banks voiced their support for the national security legislation in 2020, in a move criticised as "kowtowing" to China.<sup>18</sup> In view of these examples, the circle could be seen as a response to China's manoeuvres in Hong Kong by creating political leverage with economic pressure.

## Local versus national identity

The identity perspective can be seen as a social/political corollary to the economic dimension above. After a brief period of non-intervention, the Chinese government shifted to a more proactive strategy. The assimilation aims to strengthen cultural pride and an affiliation with the Chinese over the Hong Kong sub-national identity (Fung and Chan 2017). However, this arguably failed to assimilate Hong Kong people and provoked waves of counter-mobilisation. It is argued that a form of "peripheral nationalism," defined as a counter-mobilisation of the periphery directed against the assimilation of the centre, emerged in Hong Kong, emphasising the distinct identity of Hong Kong people against China's incorporation (Fong 2017).

As opposed to the national identity, the recognition of a Hong Kong identity was traditionally not very high. The Chinese government had also refrained from open intervention. In recent years, however, increasing fears about political assimilation, economic domination, and social conflicts between Chinese and Hongkongers have led to the rise of an "anti-China" sentiment (Ma 2015). The negative feelings toward the Chinese government and people prompted the increasing affirmation of a Hong Kong identity at the expense of the Chinese one. Studies of local movements have established how protesters frame the movements as a fight against China's political intervention and, correspondingly, identify as a common cause the preservation and strengthening of a local identity. Despite their varied objectives, the Anti-national Education Movement in 2012 (Wang 2017), the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Cheng 2016), and the Mong Kok unrests in 2016 (Kwong 2016) were all underpinned by local-national conflict. In the case of the Anti-ELAB Movement, Yuen and Cheng (2020) pointed to the erosion of Hong Kong identity and local autonomy as the source for the strong resistance.

In addition, whereas the pro-democracy movement had previously suffered from setbacks due to infighting and internal rifts, solidarity is a major theme of the Anti-ELAB Movement (Lee 2020). It had been said that the opposition groups suffered from a form of "transition fatigue," as a long period of political stagnation and discontent over the status quo divided the opposition camp, prompting internal conflicts (Kwong 2016). The situation persisted after the Umbrella Movement, as some organisations, departing from the traditional democrats, advocated more radical ideas but suffered as a result of a strong crackdown and prosecution. Given these experiences, despite the lack of a central leadership, the Anti-ELAB Movement emphasises solidarity among participants, with the most recognisable slogan being

14. Raymond Zhong and Ezra Cheung, "Cathay Pacific CEO's Resignation Shows China's Looming Power over Hong Kong Unrest," *The New York Times*, 19 August 2019, <https://cn.nytimes.com/business/20190819/cathay-pacific-ceo-resigns-rupert-hogg/zh-hant/> (accessed on 3 June 2020).
15. "國泰航空危機：掙扎在'白色恐怖'指責和中國市場之間的在港公司" (*Guotai hangkong weiji: zhengzha zai 'baise kongbu' zhize he Zhongguo shichang zhijian de zai gang gongsi*, The Crisis of Cathay Pacific: The Dilemma of Companies Based in Hong Kong Between "White Horror" and China's Market, *BBC News*, 30 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-49522279> (accessed on 3 June 2020).
16. "下一個國泰航空...須開除挺反送中員工。中國矛頭轉向四大會計師事務所" (*Xia yige guotai hangkong... xu kaichu ting fansongzhong yuangong. Zhongguo maotou zhuan xiang si da kuajishi shiwu suo*, The Next Cathay Pacific... Has to Lay Off Anti-ELAB Personnel. China Turns its Attention to the Big Four Accounting Firms), *Liberty Times Net*, 19 August 2019, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/paper/1311655> (accessed on 3 June 2020).
17. "羅兵咸安永畢馬威，與員工公開信劃席" (*Luobingxian anyong bimawei, yu yuangong gongkai xin gexi*, PwC KPMG Distanced Themselves from the Open Letter from Employees), *Ming Pao* (明報新聞網), 17 August 2019, <https://life.mingpao.com/general/article?issue=20190817&nodeid=1565979503583> (accessed on 8 June 2020).
18. Alfred Liu, Harry Wilson, and Benjamin Robertson, "Pompeo Blasts HSBC for 'Corporate Kowtows' over Hong Kong," *Bloomberg*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-10/pompeo-blasts-hsbc-for-corporate-kowtow-over-hong-kong> (accessed on 11 June 2020).

"no splitting and no severing of ties" (*bu fenhua bu gexi* 不分化不割席) (Lee 2020). With young people with little involvement in past, internal rifts becoming actively engaged in the protests, the opposition camp as a whole is predisposed to a more positive relationship among the various factions, creating a stronger common identity.

### **New form of political participation**

With stronger common identity and solidarity among Anti-ELAB Movement supporters, political consumerism has developed as an important way of helping peers and sustaining the movement. Viewed this way, political consumerism maintains the momentum and extends the struggle into one's daily life. Some have also suggested that, even if the impact of the yellow economic circle is not substantial, what is important is the symbolic meaning of the protest in daily life.<sup>19</sup> However, with this mentality, supporters might face a trade-off between two potentially competing forms of participation: protest versus consumerism. The motivation to participate in social movements is a function of the perceived cost-benefit calculations (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Protesters tend to be active in participation when the costs of participation (e.g. lost leisure time) are low, and vice versa. As the cost of physical participation in the Anti-ELAB Movement increases (e.g. possible police confrontation), political consumerism becomes more attractive due to its low barriers of entry and low costs (people must consume in any event).

It is also of theoretical and practical interest to understand whether such actions would "crowd out" other forms of participation (thus serving as a substitute for traditional forms of participation) or strengthen them (as a supplement or extension) (Stromsnes 2009). For example, the advocates of political consumerism often emphasise the fact that ordinary people who cannot afford to stand on the frontline can make a contribution through their consumption behaviour. During our interviews, a respondent explained that "consuming in yellow shops is the safest way of participation" (interviewee 10), and another even said that "such consumptions are 'indulgences' for the consumers for not engaging in protests" (interviewee 13). The question arises as to whether this might in turn suppress participation because they feel they have already played their part.

An answer to this question is important for understanding the ongoing development of political consumerism and how it might affect the trajectories of social movements in the future. To assess this, this article studies the participation pattern between consumerism actions and "traditional" forms of political participation, as well as the mediating effect of support towards Anti-ELAB Movement on political consumerism. If, for example, one's support towards the Anti-ELAB Movement is a strong mediator, it can be argued that their engagement in consumerism action is conditional on the Anti-ELAB Movement (and might dissipate as the movement declines); conversely, it might be an independent development.

### **Hypotheses**

Based on the discussion above, the following hypotheses are tested.

**Ideology-1:** Individuals who oppose further political/economic integration with Mainland China will be more active in political consumerism.

**Ideology-2:** Individuals who believe that the local economy is being dominated by Chinese capital will be more active in political consumerism.

**Ideology-3:** Individuals who believe that economics is not independent of politics will be more active in political consumerism.

**Identity-1:** Individuals with a stronger Hong Kong identity will be more active in political consumerism.

**Identity-2:** Individuals with a weaker Chinese identity will be more active in political consumerism.

**Participation:** Individuals who are more active in political consumerism will have a higher level of traditional political participation.

**Mediation:** An individual's support towards Anti-ELAB Movement does not mediate their support/participation in political consumerism.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach. First, a territory-wide randomised telephone survey of the Hong Kong population was carried out following the method commonly used by academics. The survey was conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in April 2020. The target respondents were Hong Kong residents at least 18 years of age.<sup>20</sup> The final sample size was 406, with a 43.3% response rate and a standard error within  $\pm 4.9\%$  (95% confidence interval). The background of the sample is given in detail in the appendix. In the quantitative analysis below, imputation was done to avoid any bias introduced by list-wise deletion (mainly responses of "I don't know").<sup>21</sup> The missing observation for each imputed variable only ranges from 0.2% to 3.7%, which is a very small proportion of the sample and minimises the potential of over-imputation. The unimputed results, which are largely similar with the one presented below, are available upon request. In order to increase the representativeness of the general population, the results presented below are weighted by gender, age, and education level. Next, we discuss the variables and measures used in the survey.

Second, the quantitative results were supplemented by 14 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of the yellow economic circle, including owners, co-owners, and operators of yellow shops, from May to July 2020. Interview transcripts were prepared for further data analysis.

### **Political consumerism**

To assess the phenomenon of political consumerism, this study separately evaluated an individual's levels of support and participation. First, support for boycott actions (*Boycott\_support*) was measured by the following question: "Some people would decide to patronise stores or products because of the political stance of the person in charge/investors. Do you agree with this?" The respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the strongest level of agreement. To distinguish this particular development from the movement as a whole, the results were compared against those of another question asking about support for the Anti-ELAB Movement (*Anti-ELAB Movement\_support*): "Do you support the Anti-extradition Bill Movement?" The level of support was again rated on a 5-point scale, with 5 representing the most support.

To capture the respondents' participation in political consumerism, the

19. Verna Yu, "From Loo Roll to Dumplings (...)," *op. cit.*

20. A random sampling of fixed line and cell phone numbers was performed based on the numbering plan provided by the Office of the Communications Authority. Upon successful contact of the target number, the "next birthday" method was used to select the member to answer the survey (for fixed lines).

21. Multiple imputation was done by STATA "MI imputed" command using chained equations (MICE) approach (Eddings and Marchenko 2012). During the imputation process, ten imputed datasets (m) were created. Results with unimputed (original) data are largely similar and can be found in the appendix.

survey also asked about their involvement in boycott (*Boycott\_action*) and boycott (*Boycott\_action*) actions. On a scale of 0 to 3 (0 = *never*; 1 = *rarely*; 2 = *sometimes*; 3 = *always*), respondents were asked, "Have you recently patronised/boycotted any stores or brands because of their political stance?"

### Political/economic ideology

As a phenomenon closely connected to the Anti-ELAB Movement, political consumerism might be related to sharing a certain political ideology. As reviewed above, the belief that the local economy is being dominated by China or its capital might also be an important determinant. To capture these elements of political and economic ideology, five questions were designed. First, people with a lower trust in government are found to be more active political consumerists (Baptista and Rodrigues 2018; Stromsnes 2009), and they naturally are more prone to partake in protest activities. As we are interested in the factors affecting both the Anti-ELAB Movement and political consumerism, political trust is an important common factor that has to be accounted for. The level of trust towards the government (*Trust*), which is also related to the onset of the political crisis, was measured by a question in which the respondents were asked to rate their trust in the government on a scale of 0–10, with 10 representing the highest level of trust.

Next, *Intervention* and *Integration* measured the respondent's level of agreement with the statements, "Under 'one country, two systems,' the central government can intervene into the social affairs of Hong Kong," and "Hong Kong should continue to strengthen its integration into the Chinese economy," respectively. To assess whether the impression that the local economy is being controlled by Chinese capital has an impact, respondents were asked to what extent they believed that "Hong Kong's economy is now mainly dominated by Chinese capital" (*Domination*). Finally, because political consumerism rests on the belief that consumer activities should be linked to societal concerns, we also measured the extent of agreement with the statement, "The economy should not involve politics" (*Politicisation*). Each variable was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of disagreement. In addition to these ideological variables, we also asked for the respondents' political orientation.

### Identity

Two questions were asked to capture the effect of identity, on a scale of 0–10: "To what extent do you identify yourself as a Hong Konger/Chinese?" (*HK\_identity*; *CN\_identity*). This was preferred over the traditional approach of asking respondents to pick between categories, such as "Chinese in Hong Kong" or "Hong Konger in China," as such a "national vis-à-vis local identity" paradigm adopts an ethnic nationalist principle that overlooks the political nature of the Hong Kong identity (Fong 2019). It also does not allow for people to freely indicate their identity (such as an equally strong Hong Kong and Chinese identity or a rejection of both).

### Background factors

From the literature, it is generally established that women (Lorenzini and Bassoli 2015), young people (Ward and de Vreese 2011), and the more educated (Newman and Bartels 2011) are more active in practicing political consumerism. Therefore, in this survey we controlled for *Gender*, *Age* (in seven groups), and *Education* level (in five groups). In addition, we also included a dummy variable to capture whether a respondent was *Employed* (0 = *unemployed*).<sup>22</sup> The respondents' political inclinations were also captured by asking whether they supported the democrats, localists, pro-establishment camp, moderates, or were unaffiliated (a dummy variable was used for each group, with no affiliation as the reference category).

### Political participation

To compare the patterns of political consumerism with the usual forms of political participation, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 3 (0 = *never*; 3 = *always*) whether they had participated in "any legal actions during the anti-extradition bill movements, such as rallies and protests?" (*Legal*), or in "any radical actions during the anti-extradition bill movement?" (*Radical*).<sup>23</sup> For institutionalised/formal participation, a dummy variable was used (*DC\_vote*) to indicate whether they had voted in the District Council election in December 2019.

## Results

### Ideology and identity

Because the response variables are ordinal (with multiple categories in order), ordered logistic regressions were used. To identify the predictors of political consumerism and its distinctiveness from the support towards Anti-ELAB Movement, Table 1 shows the regression results of *Boycott\_support* and *Anti-ELAB Movement\_support* as the dependent variables with the same specification.<sup>24</sup> Starting with *Boycott\_support* in Model 1, of the five ideological variables, *Integration*, *Domination*, and *Politicisation* showed significant correlations (at  $p < 0.01$ , 0.1, and 0.01, respectively) in the expected directions. This suggests that those who do not desire further integration regard the local economy as being dominated by Chinese capital (noting that the variable represents the level of disagreement), and that those who recognise the intertwined nature of politics and economics were more likely to support boycotting. Both the Hong Kong and Chinese identity variables were significant (at  $p < 0.05$  and 0.01) and in their hypothesised direction. For background factors, only the education level had a significant (positive) effect. Finally, self-identified localists and democrats demonstrated the strongest support (significant at  $p < 0.01$ ).

How does this compare with the general support for the Anti-ELAB Movement? Starting with the similarities, both inclinations were strongly associated with resistance to integration, an endorsement of the Hong Kong identity, and the rejection of the Chinese one. In contrast, distrust of the government was significantly linked to support for the Anti-ELAB Movement but not to political consumerism. The lack of effect of government trust on boycotting support might be explained by the Anti-ELAB Movement being an action that directly targets the government, whereas boycotting does the opposite in supporting fellow opponents of the regime. The same explanation can be said for *Intervention*, which significantly correlates with Anti-ELAB Movement but not consumerism (the perceived intervention of Beijing in local affairs has been one of the causes of Anti-ELAB Movement). Finally, unlike democratic supporters, the localists are less committed to the Anti-ELAB Movement ( $p < 0.1$ ) than to boycott actions.

During the interviews, virtually all interviewees agreed that boycotting is fundamentally a response against the trend of China-Hong Kong integration, as exemplified by the remarks of two participants:

22. Including income as an additional factor would reduce the sample size by about one third.

23. The survey deliberately did not provide a definition or example of "radical," as many protesters might not regard their actions as "illegal." The question was asked immediately after the "legal participation" to contrast the relative intensity of the actions.

24. Variance inflation factor (VIF) tests indicated that multicollinearity is not a concern here, nor in the models shown in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 1.** Support of boycott and Anti-ELAB Movement

| Model dependent var.                       | 1<br>Buycott_support | 2<br>AEBM_support   |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Pol/econ ideology</b>                   |                      |                     |
| Trust                                      | -0.082<br>(0.055)    | -0.26***<br>(0.067) |
| Intervention                               | 0.082<br>(0.098)     | 0.28**<br>(0.11)    |
| Integration                                | 0.36***<br>(0.13)    | 0.56***<br>(0.15)   |
| Domination                                 | -0.24*<br>(0.13)     | 0.0055<br>(0.14)    |
| Politicisation                             | 0.27***<br>(0.10)    | 0.15<br>(0.11)      |
| <b>Identity</b>                            |                      |                     |
| HK_identity                                | 0.11**<br>(0.051)    | 0.13**<br>(0.051)   |
| CN_identity                                | -0.14***<br>(0.044)  | -0.13**<br>(0.051)  |
| <b>Background</b>                          |                      |                     |
| Gender (1=male)                            | 0.21<br>(0.20)       | 0.51**<br>(0.23)    |
| Age                                        | 0.0062<br>(0.040)    | -0.085*<br>(0.045)  |
| Education                                  | 0.20**<br>(0.089)    | -0.031<br>(0.11)    |
| Employed (1=Y)                             | 0.29<br>(0.25)       | -0.14<br>(0.25)     |
| <b>Pol affiliation</b>                     |                      |                     |
| Localist<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 1.25***<br>(0.39)    | 0.82*<br>(0.45)     |
| Democrat<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 1.01***<br>(0.33)    | 1.23***<br>(0.37)   |
| Moderate<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | -0.23 0.21<br>(0.31) | <br>(0.33)          |
| Pro-establishment<br>(ref: no affiliation) | 0.80<br>(0.57)       | 0.38<br>(0.60)      |
| Observations                               | 406                  | 406                 |

\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. Standard errors in parentheses. Estimated with ordered logistic regression. Missing values were imputed with ten imputations. Source: authors.

**Table 2.** Buycott and boycott actions

| Model dependent var.                       | 3<br>Buycott_action | 4<br>Boycott_action |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Pol/econ ideology</b>                   |                     |                     |
| Trust                                      | -0.075<br>(0.059)   | -0.087<br>(0.062)   |
| Intervention                               | 0.18*<br>(0.094)    | 0.11<br>(0.10)      |
| Integration                                | 0.20<br>(0.13)      | 0.16<br>(0.14)      |
| Domination                                 | -0.19<br>(0.13)     | -0.29**<br>(0.14)   |
| Politicisation                             | 0.15<br>(0.11)      | 0.20*<br>(0.11)     |
| <b>Identity</b>                            |                     |                     |
| HK_identity                                | 0.11*<br>(0.063)    | 0.16**<br>(0.070)   |
| CN_identity                                | -0.079*<br>(0.044)  | -0.11**<br>(0.044)  |
| <b>Background</b>                          |                     |                     |
| Gender (1=male)                            | 0.14<br>(0.23)      | 0.15<br>(0.24)      |
| Age                                        | -0.096**<br>(0.046) | -0.041<br>(0.046)   |
| Education                                  | 0.013<br>(0.092)    | 0.17*<br>(0.098)    |
| Employed (1=Y)                             | 0.23<br>(0.28)      | 0.40<br>(0.30)      |
| <b>Pol affiliation</b>                     |                     |                     |
| Localist<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 1.97***<br>(0.46)   | 1.95***<br>(0.45)   |
| Democrat<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 1.69***<br>(0.38)   | 1.54***<br>(0.37)   |
| Moderate<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 0.17<br>(0.41)      | 0.13<br>(0.42)      |
| Pro-establishment<br>(ref: no affiliation) | 1.32**<br>(0.55)    | 1.15**<br>(0.59)    |
| Observations                               | 406                 | 406                 |

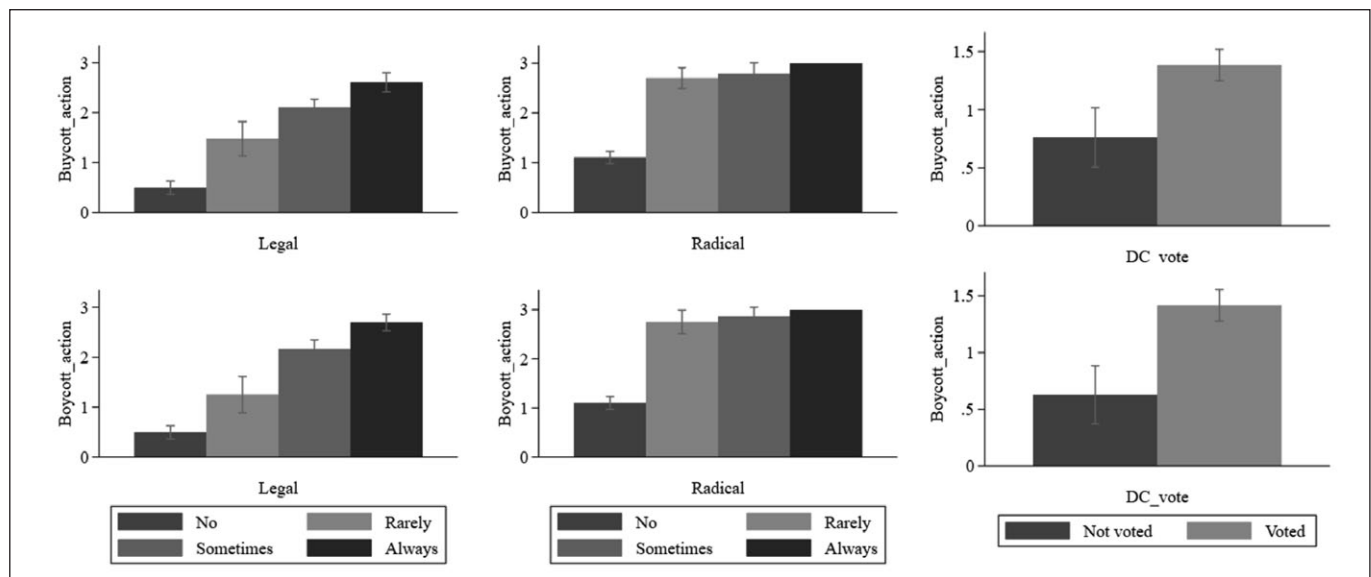
\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. Standard errors in parentheses. Estimated with ordered logistic regression. Missing values were imputed with ten imputations. Source: authors.

Chinese capital has dominated the economy of Hong Kong, which throttles the room of survival for local small enterprises... The yellow economic circle has turned many Hong Kong people to reject Chinese businesses and consume more in small local ones. (Interviewee 4)  
Pro-China large enterprises dominate the daily lives of the locals. (...) The yellow economic circle is to re-create a new consumption model for them. (Interviewee 10)

Other participants held the opinion that the yellow economic circle could be considered a "resistance" against domination of Chinese business in Hong Kong (interviewees 1 and 11). The most important purpose is to provide a "choice of consumption" against or even beyond China (interviewees 3 and 9).

Likewise, almost all interviewees recognised the connection between the Hong Kong identity and political consumerism. As one shop owner pointed out, "For me, consuming in yellow shops reflects support to the common belief among Hongkongers" (interviewee 4). The difference lies in the distinction between Hong Kong and Chinese identity. By consuming in yellow shops, supporters could gain recognition with people who share the same belief and identity. Thus, political consumption can be considered a way of "treasuring the identity of Hongkongers" (interviewee 14), "a preservation of Hong Kong's unique culture" (interviewee 5), and "a support towards democratic values" (interviewee 7, 8, and 10). In general, the existence of political consumerism is "an expression of dissatisfaction towards China's 'invasion' of the Hong Kong identity" (interviewee 13).



**Figure 1.** Relationships between political participation, and boycott and boycott actions

Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Source: authors.

### Boycotting vs. boycotting

Next, for comparison with the stated support of political consumerism, we examined the actual frequency with which respondents practiced boycotting and boycotting. As shown in Table 2, the overall results were somewhat weaker than their stated support (which is understandable given the costs of participation). For ideology, only the perception of Chinese capital infiltrating the local economy proved to be a strong motivation for boycotting businesses with close Chinese connections. Indeed, in addition to the main purpose of identifying yellow shops, the proponents of political consumerism emphasise the backgrounds of businesses that seem "innocuous" to dissuade people from patronising them (e.g. McDonald's, as its largest shareholdings are from Chinese capital). In contrast, *Intervention* explained boycotting (albeit only marginally significant) but not boycotting, which is in line with the assumption that boycotting is a form of action intended to support fellow travellers in the wider social movement.

Turning to political identification, as expected, self-identified localists and democrats were both strongly associated with each type of action. More surprising might be the significant effect of the pro-establishment supporters. It is noted that, in response to the apparent success of the yellow economic circle, the pro-establishment side has actually proposed a countering "blue economic circle."<sup>25</sup> It is also noted that our survey did not specify the ideology behind political consumerism (nor whether we were referring to the yellow/blue economic circle) and thus might also have captured the counteracting actions of pro-government supporters.

During the interviews, most participants were more enthusiastic about boycotting than boycotting (perhaps unsurprisingly as direct beneficiaries of the former). Some participants illustrated these in the interviews:

In my restaurant, I don't see many pro-Beijing supporters boycott us but many customers, especially the youngsters, boycott blue shops because of their opposing political stance. (Interviewee 6)

Boycotting is inevitable in such a highly polarised society. (...) But, as a shopkeeper, we can only improve our food quality instead of encouraging boycotting against the blue shops. (...) That's what we can do. (Interviewee 11)

**Table 3.** Political consumerism and political participation

| Model dependent var.                       | 5 Radical          | 6 Legal           | 7 DC_vote          |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Pol consumerism</b>                     |                    |                   |                    |
| Boycott_action                             | 0.74***<br>(0.27)  | 0.62***<br>(0.17) | 0.033<br>(0.13)    |
| Boycott_action                             | 0.74**<br>(0.32)   | 0.59***<br>(0.16) | 0.21<br>(0.14)     |
| <b>Background</b>                          |                    |                   |                    |
| Gender (1=male)                            | 0.21<br>(0.40)     | 0.39<br>(0.25)    | 0.32*<br>(0.18)    |
| Age                                        | -0.19**<br>(0.079) | -0.023<br>(0.047) | 0.12***<br>(0.034) |
| Education                                  | -0.19<br>(0.19)    | 0.29***<br>(0.10) | 0.24***<br>(0.077) |
| Employed (1=Y)                             | -0.28<br>(0.47)    | 0.18<br>(0.29)    | 0.39**<br>(0.19)   |
| <b>Pol affiliation</b>                     |                    |                   |                    |
| Localist<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 0.81<br>(1.07)     | 1.27***<br>(0.45) | 0.55<br>(0.34)     |
| Democrat<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | 0.30<br>(1.02)     | 1.51***<br>(0.38) | 0.43*<br>(0.25)    |
| Moderate<br>(ref: no affiliation)          | -0.61<br>(1.15)    | 0.60<br>(0.44)    | 0.059<br>(0.24)    |
| Pro-establishment<br>(ref: no affiliation) | -1.26<br>(1.27)    | -1.64<br>(1.11)   | 1.13***<br>(0.44)  |
| Observations                               | 406                | 406               | 406                |

\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. Standard errors in parentheses. Estimated with ordered logistic regression (probit for model 7). Missing values were imputed with ten imputations. Source: authors.

25. "疫情下的蓝色经济圈茶餐厅: 蝕本借貸都要撐住舖頭, 反對派錢相信政府" (Yiqing xia de lanse jingji quan chachanting: shiben jiedai dou yao chengzhu putou, fandui paiqian xiangxin zhengfu, Tea Restaurant in Blue Economic Circle under Covid-19: The Restaurant should Run even with Loss and Debt and We Oppose Giving Cash Handouts and Believe in the Government), *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (信報財經新聞), 24 February 2020, <https://www2.hkej.com/multimedia/view/id/2384523> (accessed on 15 July 2020).



### Forms of political participation

Finally, we explored the relationship between political consumerism and other forms of participation. This was first assessed by plotting *Boycott-action* (on a scale of 0–3) against *Radical*, *Legal*, and *DC\_vote* by their level of participation (Figure 1). The plots for boycott (top row) and boycott (bottom row) are extremely similar, and both suggest that political consumerism and other forms of participation have a positive correlation. The difference was also significant when referring to confidence intervals (marked by the error bars). The level of boycott and boycott actions gradually increased with the frequency of legal participation. Although the same is true for radical participation, the major difference is between those who were not involved in radical actions and those who were (regardless of the frequency of involvement). Respondents who vote were also more likely to engage in political consumerism.

Although the graphs are illustrative, they do not control for other possible confounders of the relationship. For this purpose, Table 3 reports the regression models for the three forms of participation. In line with the results above, Models 5 and 6 show that both *Radical* and *Legal* strongly associated with both consumerist actions. However, neither boycott nor boycott showed significant correlations with *DC\_vote*, suggesting that political consumerism had no effect (positive or negative) on this institutionalised form of participation. Of course, this does not mean that people who engaged in political consumerism did not vote: the 2019 District Council election recorded the highest voter turnout in history. It only means that those who did not participate in any political consumerism were equally likely to vote, which is not surprising given the mobilisation efforts of the pro-establishment camp; in this respect, the significant effect of the pro-establishment side is also telling.

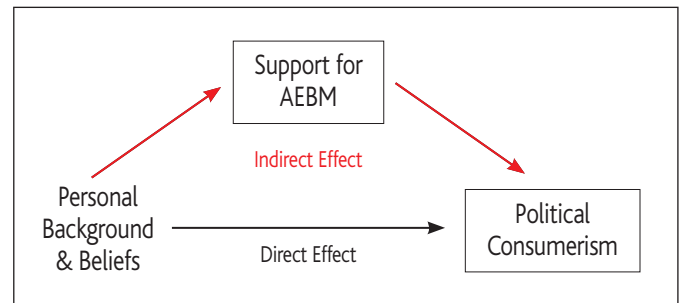
The general consensus among the interviewees is that political consumption could encourage further political participation. Yellow shops were considered places for supporters with similar values and identity to converge. During times of mobilisation, yellow shops were important for “delivering pro-movement messages” (interviewees 1, 5, and 10), “encouraging more participation” (interviewees 9 and 11), and “subsiding the movement” (interviewees 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9). As confided by one restaurant owner, a moderate protester had gradually become more radical after frequently reading their in-shop pamphlets and materials, and “changed their mind and started considering how to contribute more to the campaign” (interviewee 5). Even as the movement demobilises, yellow shops would still be crucial for Hongkongers to “gather outside of protests” (interviewees 6, 8, 10, and 11).

### The mediating role of the Anti-ELAB Movement on political consumerism

Notwithstanding the participation pattern described, perhaps a more crucial question is the fundamental relationship between the Anti-ELAB Movement and political consumerism. That is, whether the latter is an extension of the former, or whether they are two distinct developments. While a complete answer might not be possible until both phenomena further unfold, we offer a preliminary exploration of this by a mediation analysis, which is conceptually presented in Figure 2. The idea is to estimate the relationship between Anti-ELAB Movement support, political consumerism, and their hypothesised factors with structural equation modelling and the causal mediation framework (Imai *et al.* 2011). In effect, the association between the factors and political consumerism (the outcome) is decomposed into direct and indirect effects, the latter of which

is said to be “mediated” by Anti-ELAB Movement support (the mediating factor). Although this might not accurately depict the dynamic relationship between the two, the results can shed light on the extent to which the factors of consumerism go through the Anti-ELAB Movement (thus providing some evidence that they are part of the same phenomenon).

**Figure 2.** The mediating role of Anti-ELAB Movement on political consumerism



A graphical representation of mediation analysis following Imai *et al.* (2011). Source: authors.

**Table 4.** Effect mediated by support for Anti-ELAB Movement

| Mediated variables         | DV: <i>Boycott_support</i> | <i>Boycott_action</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Integration                | 52%                        | 62%                   |
| HK_identity                | 24%                        | 19%                   |
| CN_identity                | 21%                        | 17%                   |
| Affiliation: Localist      | 21%                        | 7%                    |
| Affiliation: Democrat      | 40%                        | 13%                   |
| Affiliation: Establishment | 1.8%                       | 0.8%                  |

Source: authors.

The results of the analysis are shown in Table 4. The figures are the share of the variables’ effect on the outcome that is “mediated” by *AEBM\_support* (only the previously significant factors are listed here; AEBM stands here for Anti-ELAB Movement). For example, for *Boycott\_support*, as much as 52% of the effect of *Integration* indirectly goes through AEBM. Comparing the figures here, it can be argued that *Integration* is the only factor of political consumerism that is heavily mediated by AEBM. Only a small part of both identity variables’ effect is mediated; the same goes for affiliation (the figures of pro-establishment affiliation are not surprising given their supposed stance towards the Anti-ELAB Movement support). In sum, whereas the Anti-ELAB Movement support and consumerism actions have some shared origins (including the opposition towards further Mainland-Hong Kong integration), they have their own set of non-overlapping factors. In other words, we predict that political consumerism will continue to be a main form of participation even as the Anti-ELAB Movement seems to have come to an abrupt end.

### Conclusion

Despite the significance of the Anti-ELAB Movement, studies have largely focused on traditional forms of protests. This study attempts to build a theoretical framework to explain the emergence of political consumerism as a new phenomenon in Hong Kong. With a representative survey and interviews, it was found that (1) Hong Kong people who oppose China-Hong Kong economic integration were more likely to support boycotting; (2)

people with a strong Chinese identity were more likely to oppose boycotting, whereas self-identified localists demonstrated the strongest support; (3) people who engaged in political consumerism were more likely to participate in both legal and radical protests; and (4) as the movement leading to the rise of political consumerism, the Anti-ELAB Movement partially mediates one's engagement and support in political consumerism. In particular, much of the effects of political affiliation and identity were directly associated with political consumerism, hinting at its robust nature as an emerging form of participation.

It is acknowledged that the main results of this article are largely expected. Our purpose is to enrich the literature on political consumerism with the experience of Hong Kong. First, the concept of political consumerism has been mostly applied to Western democracies and generally pertains to ethical issues such as environmental standards. This study explores its emergence in Hong Kong as part of a democratic movement, with the aim of supporting the movement and fighting against the China-dominated economy. Second, the literature on political consumerism has focused on the correlation of such behaviours with demographic factors and political orientation. This study adapts these contributions and explains the emergence of political consumerism in Hong Kong through three perspectives: collective ideologies, political identity, and political participation. The suggested framework provides a good foundation for future studies on this new development. The conceptual validity and relevance of the framework are also empirically supported.

As to the rapidly changing political situation in Hong Kong, this study provides an analysis of a new form of political participation. In recent years, Beijing has adopted an assimilationist economic incorporation/co-optation of local economic elites to extract greater economic integration (Fong 2017), with political control via economic means as the ultimate goal. However, this strategy, along with other forms of political intervention, has

triggered a strong reaction from local people in the form of large-scale social movements. As the costs of physical participation (police confrontation and potential legal consequences) in such movements have increased due to the government's suppression, it is expected that political consumerism will become an ever more important battleground in Hong Kong. Indeed, our mediation analysis provides preliminary evidence that political consumerism will be here to stay even as the protests have subsided.

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