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## The Milk Tea Alliance

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## The Milk Tea Alliance

Master Thesis - Stella Lingens - S2046385

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### *Abstract*

The Milk Tea Alliance (MTA), an online pan-Asian movement, generated unprecedented participation in the region through an interplay of benefits and a constructed relative deprivation that was capable of overcoming different grievances. Literature emerging from the Arab spring has brought about several benefits that applied to the MTA, namely invitation of social movements, sharing of information and tactics, solidarity, social capital, mobilization, and motivation. However, the MTA was not able to initiate social movements contrary to expectations. The other benefits are found to apply. By combining constructivist theory and relative deprivation theory I argue that the MTA experienced this unprecedented participation because a constructed relative deprivation partly created by Hong Kong and adopted by participating countries such as Myanmar which was able to create shared grievances that inform participation. The grievance was with authoritarianism and China which was often equated and thus allowed for a perception of a shared grievance, ideology, and identity. Additionally, the MTA expanded on the benefits by having an internally unifying power in Myanmar and building an alternative to ASEAN. Another reason for participation is a demographic aspect. However, so far, the MTA has not managed to have the desired success.

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## *Introduction*

Images of increased violence at mass protests in Hong Kong and Myanmar recently shocked the world. But the world was not the only one that was shocked. The Myanmar military dictator Min Aung Hlaing admitted having been surprised by the resilience and adaptability of the protestors (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Whether it is the three-finger salute in Myanmar and five fingers in Hong Kong or the usage of helmets and umbrellas, the tactics of the protestors informed each other. This was possible with the Milk Tea Alliance, a pan-Asian connection of social movements that started online and spread through the region and into the offline sphere.

According to Schaffar and Wongratanawin (2021), an incident in April 2020 initiated the MTA. Chinese internet users attacked a popular Thai actor for reposting a tweet where Hong Kong was called a country. Thai fans defended the actor and Hong Kong activists joined in the defence resulting in the MTA. The name refers to a public milk tea drink in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan distinguishing them from China, where tea without milk is more common. Myanmar and India were quick to put forward their national milk tea drink when they joined the movement. The MTA is predominantly consisting of young people. According to Mak (2021), the name was put forward by Hongkongers who have reinvented the traditional meaning of milk tea, which was the support of government-led societies without unrest and reconstructed it to a new narrative of identity and ideology which includes freedom of speech and differentiation from China. Therefore, the name of the MTA is a symbolic cultural distinction from China and the governments of the region signalling the difference to the older generation.

The social movements that form the MTA are distinct in their grievances, structure and aims. On the one hand, as reported by Cheung and Hughes (2020) Hong Kong has a history of protesting Chinese encroachment which is in line with the security law protests. According to the BBC (2021), Hong Kong's social movement cleavages are mostly along generational lines.

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Hong Kong is officially considered a special administrative zone, meaning some level of autonomy is granted and it is relatively wealthy. Therefore, the social movement in Hong Kong has local grievances and is aiming at maintaining the status quo. In Myanmar on the other hand, people took to the streets because of the military coup that reversed the democratization protest (Pierson, 2021). According to the OHCHR (2019), ethnic and religious divides are present in the social movements in Myanmar and further complicate the situation. Myanmar's military owns most of the natural resources such as gems, oil, and tropical wood which leaves the civilian population relatively poor. Most of the social movements focus on the military, which is committing human rights violations, genocide and is preventing the democratization protest. The social movement in Myanmar is therefore distinct from the one in Hong Kong.

The timeline of the social movements does not correlate. Hong Kong's movement ended months before Myanmar's started. Moreover, despite the proximity and overlap of previous protests such as in Taiwan (2014), in Hong Kong (2014) or Thailand (2013) no significant transnational movement emerged then. It was unprecedented how the MTA created support for each other between social movements in different states and between different groups within states (Frydenlund et al., 2021). Thus, most movements in the region that face different grievances do not participate closely together. Considering the four differences, neither the different goals, the different grievances, the socio-structural factors nor the history indicate an outcome like the MTA. Hence, the question remaining is: Why do social movements with different grievances participate together in The Milk Tea Alliance?

I attempt to answer this question by identifying several benefits of participation in an online social movement from previous literature. Additionally, I will use a combination of relative deprivation theory and constructivist theory to find a possible explanation for overcoming the different grievances, namely a constructed ideology. As it is known from historical examples, constructed ideologies can form a common identity (Moss & Tronvoll,

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2015). I will focus on the online sphere in my analysis because this is where the MTA started, and participation is initiated and continued. I hope to answer my research question through a comparison of Hong Kong and Myanmar by conducting a discourse analysis of tweets checked with newspaper articles.

This research provides important insights into the influences of the current social movements in South-East Asia and the world. In the past ten years, internet usage and accessibility roughly doubled worldwide (The World Bank, 2021). Therefore, it is important to update the previous literature about the stages of social movements, their ideology, and their mobilization and the role of social media therein. Little research is done on the MTA, which might be due to its recency. Hence, this research provides important insights into the political and social developments in the region which is likely to be at the centre of attention in the next century especially regarding the rise of China and its consequences. The theoretical framework and its unifying potential can have implications for other social movements and ethnic cleavages.

## *Literature Review*

### *Social Movements*

Social movements are “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, based on a shared collective identity” (Diani, 1992, p. 13). Social movements can change society, but they can also fail. Ideologies are at the very foundation of social movements and inform the shared identity. However, ideologies vary greatly between different movements. Christiansen (2009) famously identifies a life cycle that follows four main stages that social movements go through, although not all movements reach all stages. Firstly, the stage of emergence displays a common

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discontent in society but there is no organization of this discontent yet and thus no collective action. Moving from individual to organized collective action happens in the second stage. At this stage, a leadership emerges which brings strategy with it. Thirdly, the organization increases, and the political power with it due to access to political elites which is coordinated by trained personnel. Nevertheless, at this stage, the risk of fainting of the movement due to failure to bureaucratize and hence lack of capacity to mobilize is present.

Lastly, the fourth stage described by Christiansen (2009) is the decline which can occur for several reasons. One reason for the decline is repression, which means that authorities get control or destroy the movement sometimes through violent measures. Another one is co-optation which happens when the leadership cooperates with the authorities. Success and failure are two reasons whereby success is common with small and local movements with specific goals while failure can happen due to organizational or strategic failings. The last reason is that the ideologies of the movement are adopted by the mainstream. Christiansen already hints at technology to be a potentially changing factor in the life cycle, especially regarding bureaucratization. Therefore, I will now review the prior research on social media's impact on social movements and their life cycle.

### *Social Media*

The recent two decades saw the rise of the internet and its impact on many people's lives. Accordingly, social movements have also changed and expanded into the online sphere whereby social media played a dominant role and has thus entered the discussion about social movements. Conforming to Kidd and McIntosh (2016) the opinions of the impact of social media on social movements are split. On the one hand, Techno-pessimists emphasize that the factors believed to benefit the protestors actually benefit government and corporate powers. Thus, instead of putting a tool in the hand of protestors, it is contributing to observing them. In

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addition, it was found that internet or media disruptions can increase participation in demonstrations. Lastly, the increased participation observed is according to the techno-pessimists rather online than offline because by clicking and sharing online people feel they have participated and are less willing to join a protest on the streets.

On the other hand, as Kidd and McIntosh and Hwang and Kim (2015) show techno-optimists acknowledge the potential of social media and its opportunities to tackle social problems. They believe that the impact of online social movements on offline social movements is high and can take a supportive and motivating role. Social movements arise from a struggle with power while usually entailing a hierarchy themselves. The techno-optimists argue that social media has significantly flattened or abolished this hierarchy and thus established a space for grassroot social movements. Consequently, as Christiansen predicted the bureaucratization stage would be skipped. Furthermore, the main impact social media had on the protest on the streets was the mobilization of participants, the sharing of strategies and the likelihood of success. Benefits or potential risks as identified by both sides could have an important impact on social movements participating together.

### *Online Social Movements*

There were a few online social movements, yet the Arab spring constitutes the first online social movement in the developing world and hence, poses an important example of social movements participating together online. One question that was posed and took an important role in much of the research following the Arab spring is: Will the revolution be tweeted? However, opinions diverged along the lines of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism about the overall importance and impact of social media for the events and who benefitted. Even though the online influence on real-life events in the Arab spring is highly



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debated, it fuelled the discussion about social media's role in social movements. The role of social media is an important step to understanding the motivation for participation.

Alterman (2011) found that in the Arab spring the perception that social media mobilized thousands of people that then protested peacefully and achieved a revolution was dominant but did not hold according to the techno-pessimists. They argue the revolution never actually happened. Secondly, not the new media including social media played a vital role but rather the old media such as television. Thirdly, the role social media had was to make people feel they are activists by engaging in online activities and giving out content which means that the techno-optimist that focus mainly on the content received and not the content produced would overstate the significance of social media. Additionally, social media did neither play a role in constitutional processes nor in forming political parties. Lastly, in line with Sorour and Lal Dey (2014), an issue with social media in developing countries is its accessibility such as in Egypt where mainly English-speaking elites engaged on social media at first leading to disproportional representation.

Contrarily, Comunello and Anzera (2012) argue that the Arab spring highlighted the significance of social media regarding organization and mobilization in the developing world. Accessibility and users of social media have sharply increased during the Arab Spring and representation of society with it. Secondly, social media has significantly lowered the cost of communication and increased flexibility. Therefore, it has eased the process of spreading independent information and adjusting the tactics of social movements. According to Shirky (2011), social media has managed to initiate movements and mobilize and coordinate protestors. Despite the important role social media plays it does not guarantee success. Nevertheless, activists continuously and increasingly use social media platforms, while governments try to restrain them or use them for their purposes. Consequently, the importance

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of social media in bringing about social change can be seen in the importance the governments and activists ascribe to it.

One consent among scholars resulting from the Arab spring is that online activism can have a real-life impact. In general, it is not a one-way street rather both social media and the offline world complement each other, and thus social media can have an undeniable impact (Sorour & Lal Dey, 2014). The two positions seem to be two sides of the same coin. Only because the governments can utilize or restrict social media does not mean that it is at the same time a helpful tool for activists. Here Shirky's argument is convincing, that simply put the importance given to it by all participating actors indicates its real importance. At times the impact was overstated but this does not imply that there was none, nor does it preclude a development towards an increased impact. Similarly, social media and the old media (television etc.) can also act hand in hand and are not mutually exclusive. Regardless, there might be a real risk of social media activism making a person believe they have sufficiently participated in the social movement and not participate offline because the threshold is higher. Despite this risk, a new online movement that spans over the Asian continent has emerged and different social movements have decided to tie themselves together in the Milk Tea Alliance.

In sum, the literature review describes the stages of social movements and the impact of social media. Furthermore, is the literature resulting from the Arab Spring as an example of a regional online social movement reviewed. However, the literature from the Arab spring does not address a difference in grievances that is present in the MTA. Thus, participation in an online social movement despite different grievances poses a research gap. Therefore, to understand what has led the movements to overcome their difference in grievances I will combine the relative deprivation theory and the constructivist theory to form a theoretical framework that could explain how those differences are overcome.

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### *Theoretical Framework*

From the literature review, several possible explanations of participation in a social movement can be derived. Shirky (2011) states that social media is capable to initiate movements and functions as a coordinating tool. Comunello and Anzera (2012) agree that the potential of social media lies in the coordination of social movements. According to them, these new technologies allow protestors to be more adaptive and quickly respond to government measures, due to the rapid, free, and accessible information and tactical sharing that can organize social movements and provide logistical advantages. Furthermore, Hwang and Kim (2015) find that the participatory nature of social media is effective in mobilizing people and necessary resources for the offline sphere of social movements because it is able to connect people beyond geographic difficulties. Moreover, social media affects social capital by forming new connections and keeping old ones. In return, the social capital formed through the relationships online impacts the offline commitment to participation and through its wide reach can mobilize people that would have otherwise been uninterested. Additionally, the motivational capacity which evolves from the support by fellow users and the information shared is found in social media. The cost is decreased by the nature of social media which is free and widely accessible. Thus, no monetary effort has to be put in sharing information, mobilizing etc.

The decrease of cost, the capability of initiation of social movements, the formation of social capital and mobilization, the possibilities of coordination, the logistical and adaptive potential and the motivational aspect are benefits of participation in online social movements. However, they cannot explain how different grievances were overcome. A combination of relative deprivation theory and constructivist theory, which explains the formation of shared grievances that can create a collective ideology and identity is expected to provide a possible

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explanation. It is important to investigate how the different grievances were overcome in order to fill the research gap and understand why the movements in the MTA.

Relative deprivation theory explains the increase and decrease of people joining social movements. According to Walker and Smith (2001), relative deprivation theory is based on the understanding that objective events are interpreted by a subjective understanding at which core lies a comparison. In other words, the individual grievance is a lens through which events are interpreted. Individuals in a group experience relative deprivation to others or other times. Consequently, they mobilize with others who share their grievances which makes grievance central to participation in social movements. For example, pro-democracy protestors in Myanmar feel grievance because they are less democratic and are more endangered than a year ago. They subjectively perceive to have had more rights in the democratic period and thus understand the military coup as a grievance that mobilizes them to protest for democracy. The more relative deprivation there is, the higher is the participation in the social movement and vice versa. Relative deprivation theory is widely seen as a basis for analysing social movement participation.

Relative deprivation theory is explaining the phenomena of social movements under the condition of a group sharing the same or similar grievances. The type of grievance is essential in understanding the social movement's ideology (Hine, 2015). According to Taylor (2001), the mobilization can happen along various lines such as race, ethnicity, class etc. The group that is experiencing grievance is doing so in direct comparison to the dominant group. Thus, individuals that share grievances and identity join to prevent or evoke structural change. Furthermore, as stated by De la Sablonnière et al. (2009) collective relative deprivation is increased when social change is perceived as reoccurring or negative by people which in return leads to more people expressing their deprivation and thus participating in social movements. Consequently, relative deprivation is subjective and dependent on the context. Shared

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grievances, ideology, and identity interplay with each other create social movements. Several questions arise:

What group does an individual join to protest their grievance? To what do people compare themselves? How do they get to know about their deprivation? How are different grievances overcome? These questions help us understand how grievance, ideology, and identity is formed and the following participation in social movements.

The constructivist theory provides insights into the formation of ideologies and identities which in return inform grievances could provide answers to the questions. The constructivist theory according to Fierke (2006) offers an account of how our social reality is constructed. The theory describes a process whereby what is objectively existent is transformed through human actors. In other words, meanings are constructed within a context whereby the main tools to construct meanings are language and practices. Constructivism as an international relations theory mainly explains state behaviour but I believe it can be transferred and applied to groups and thus social movements as well. As Finnemore (1996) mentions parts of the state are also the groups that constrain it. Social practices constitute groups that are influenced by a shift of norms domestically and internationally. Hence, groups are in continuous change.

In consonance with Hopf (1998), actors form their interests and ideologies through norms and practices. Hence, meaningful behaviour is only produced intersubjectively. In other words, actions only are meaningful in a social context which forms identities that are essential to basic order. Thus, ideology and identity are intertwined and produced in an intersubjective discourse. Identities are essential because they inform yourself and others of who you are, including one's interests and ideologies which in return informs grievances that lead to actions. Similarly, the identity of a group is formed by the outsiders understanding and the insiders' social practices. Social practices create power through the reproduction of structures that form the social world and actors in it. However, discursive power is just one part of the story the

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other part is the means to produce such power through resources that therefore interact closely with discursive power. If actors enter the stage with sufficient resources and discursive power, they can inflict change. Consequently, constructive power consists of the reproduction and scrutiny of discourse and social practices that inform ideology and identity.

Applied to the relative deprivation theory it follows, that grievances, ideologies, and identities can be constructed and adjusted. In other words, the grievances an individual perceives and the group this individual then joins to alleviate the grievances can be constructed through ideology. The transferral from individual grievances towards group grievances leaves space to frame and construct who is a participant in this group and what aim would litigate the grievance. For example, the MTA defined themselves as having anti-authoritarian ideology leaving the space open for many individuals and existing social movements in the region and across the globe to identify with the MTA. Assuming the alliance would have defined themselves with an anti-securitization law grievance and ideology mainly Hongkongers would identify with it. Consequently, the construction of a common ideology and identity through a shared grievance explains how the difference in grievances is overcome.

In sum, social movements mobilize around grievance, ideology, and identity according to relative deprivation theory. The constructivist theory provides insights into how such shared ideologies and identities form and how they create a perceived shared grievance. A shared grievance, ideology and identity is decisive for which group people join. Applied to the MTA, forming an ideology around milk tea with which several countries can identify, and which is distinct from the Chinese tea (without milk) was significant constructing shared grievances and overcoming differences. Consequently, another layer of grievance is added to the social movements by having a common enemy. The shared grievance of authoritarianism/China constructs a congruent ideology and identity which overcomes different grievances and is a reason to join the MTA.

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### *Research design*

To answer the research question, I will use a qualitative approach that inquiries into the causes of an effect. The causes for participation are unknown (independent variable) while the effect or the participation in the MTA is known (dependent variable). The possible causes, meaning the social movements participating in the MTA are few which might be due to its formation in April 2020 and the thus relative recency and still developing events. Qualitative studies are suitable to research a few cases because they allow for an in-depth analysis. Consequently, qualitative methods are suitable for the research.

I will test the theory established in the theoretical framework while leaving space for other possible explanations. Possible reasons are the decrease of cost, the capability of initiation of social movements, the formation of social capital and mobilization, the possibilities of coordination, the logistical and adaptive potential, and the motivational aspect. In other words, the benefits of participating in the MTA. Furthermore, I will analyse if the difference in grievance was overcome by a constructed relative deprivation that created common grievance, ideology, and identity. These two aspects together are capable of answering the research question. To increase the validity of the research, this research will make use of triangulation with an analysis of a combination of theory, Twitter data, and newspaper articles. To establish the importance of each variable a comparison between two cases is suitable.

As cases, Hong Kong and Myanmar seem to fit the research the best because they differ the most among major participants of the MTA. Therefore, analysing these most different cases from the possible case selection will provide insights into the reasons why they participate in the MTA. Firstly, the social movements from Hong Kong and Myanmar did not occur at the same time. Secondly, Myanmar and Hong Kong have significant differences as developed in the introduction. Thirdly, Myanmar is struggling with the democratization process for decades which the military coup intercepted and sparked the social movement. It is a country with

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extreme ethnic diversity and significantly less internet access compared to Hong Kong. Hong Kong on the other hand is part of China's one country two systems approach whereby it is a major economic powerhouse and has comparatively few ethnic divides. It has contrary to Myanmar seen a democratic decline over the past years where the securitization law, which sparked the protests, was just another step towards integration with China. The social movements in Hong Kong and Myanmar have a different history, aim, participation and structure. The differences between Hong Kong and Myanmar are more complex than the scope of this paper allows me to investigate. Moreover, with a limited number of cases, they will not be perfectly most different. Despite these limitations, Hong Kong and Myanmar are closest to being most different among the available cases and thus suitable cases for comparison.

Tweets are an important source to analyse because the MTA started as an online movement on Twitter and Myanmar also joined the movement on Twitter. Tweets from major accounts of the social movements and prominent figures, more specifically a Twitter account from Hong Kong with around 170.000 followers and two prominent activists from Hong Kong with 723.200 followers and 291.400 followers will be analysed. Myanmar accounts have fewer followers which is why more accounts were analysed. Three general accounts (6.983-186.100 followers) and three activists (49.400-103.000 followers) will be analysed from Myanmar. Furthermore, several tweets with a minimum of around 100 retweets will be analysed ranging from 99 to 32.500 retweets which indicates their significance. Furthermore, to analyse the offline impact and verify the Twitter findings newspaper articles will be analysed. A variety of newspaper articles is important to find out real-world events because they can be opinionated. Therefore, this research analyses articles from newspapers with different perspectives from North America, Europe, and Asia which is where the topic was addressed.

The data will be analysed with discourse analysis to find out which independent variables explained above apply. I will use discourse analysis because it is useful to uncover



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the meaning of the text analysed and see it in its context regarding time, origin, and context. Discourse analysis is therefore also helpful in analysing constructed grievance, ideology, and identity. Additionally, changes over time can be identified by using discourse analysis. I focus on several aspects in the discourse analysis of the tweets for each possible reason.

Tweets that include and exclude the #MilkTeaAlliance will be analysed. When the hashtag is included in a tweet with a possible reason it is indicating correlation while if this is not the case or rarely the case it indicates that it is not a plausible reason for participation. As depicted in Table 1 for information sharing I will look at images and texts that are shared that include information and what type of information they include. Furthermore, will I engage with the reactions to the tweets and take notice of the time they were shared especially regarding tweets that shared logistics and tactics. For mobilization, I will focus on specific calls to join protests and share the specifics of the protests to enable participation. Similarly, for social capital, I will look for invitations to join the MTA. Moreover, (re)affirming statements about the relationships between the different social movements and that show support are part of the analysis paying attention to the date. The specific word of solidarity will be researched and the contexts thereof, such as the accounts and movements addressed. Lastly, to analyse motivation the focus will be on words, memes, or pictures that express motivational intent.

As shown in Table 1 different from the other categories I focussed on tweets that include the #MilkTeaAlliance for analysing the constructed relative deprivation. Supporting the theory is the specific use of anti-authoritarian and anti-China while anti-securitization law and anti-dictatorship, junta etc. is seen as opposing. However, since they are not mutually exclusive the recurrent use of the supporting phrases would already indicate a degree of construction of the relative deprivation. Additionally, the internally unifying power will be researched by looking at the relationship with the Rohingyas as an example. Calls for inclusion, a show of support, and apologies on the one side and requests for inclusion and putting forward similarities by the

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Rohingyas will be looked at. Lastly, the MTA as an alternative to ASEAN will be analysed by looking at what the tweets say about ASEAN and their stance to the organization as well as the international and regional perspective of the MTA. (See Table 1)

Table 1:

<b>Tweets: Topic</b>	<b>In support of the theory (Tweets with #MilkTeaAlliance)</b>	<b>In opposition to the theory (Tweets without #MilkTeaAlliance)</b>
Information sharing	Shared pictures; Shared information of any sort with and without images; Internal and external information sharing; Which information is shared; Reactions to tweets; Which accounts and who was sharing?; Hashtags used together	What is the information shared without the hashtag; Internal and external information sharing; Reactions to tweets; Which accounts and who was sharing?
Logistics and tactics	Pictures and information about tactics shared; Time at which these were shared	Pictures and information about tactics shared; Time at which these were shared
Mobilization	Calls to join protests; Information about protests shared;	Calls to join protests; Information about protests shared;
Social Capital	Calls to join; Reaching out to other social movements; (Re)affirmation statements of relationships and support; Time of tweeting	Tweets around the same time
Solidarity	The word solidarity used and in which context	The word solidarity used and in which context
Motivation	Use of motivational words memes and pictures	Use of motivational words memes and pictures
	<b>Supporting phrases</b>	<b>Opposing phrases</b>
Constructed Relative Deprivation	Use of anti-authoritarian; Use of anti-China; Memes with anti-Chinese sentiment; Protests images against China;	Anti-securitization law; Anti-dictatorship
Internally unifying	Calls for inclusion; Rohingya calls to be included and reactions thereof	
Alternative to ASEAN	ASEAN mentioned in tweets and what is said about the institution; International and regional perspective of the MTA	

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I looked through newspaper articles, that wrote about the MTA. The topic was mainly addressed by Western or Asian based newspapers. I tried to look at different newspapers to validate as much as possible. In the articles, I searched for them addressing or not addressing the aspects to check the results from the Twitter research. Additionally, I looked for other reasons that were mentioned repeatably, which might not have been found on Twitter.

### *Empirical Analysis*

Tweets of the MTA in Hong Kong have not been found to initiate any of the social movements. The social movement in Hong Kong existed before the MTA existed. Similarly, tweets of the MTA in Myanmar have also not been found initiating social movements.

### *Information sharing*

The MTA was used for sharing information in Hong Kong. Indeed, it was part of the MTA from the beginning to raise awareness and international attention (Joshua Wong, 2020). For example, crackdowns and the number of dead or imprisoned people were reported (Max Mok, 2021). However, despite the existence of the MTA, much more of the information in Hong Kong was spread without using the Hashtag (Stand With Hong Kong, 2020). This might suggest that the existing network in Hong Kong was sufficient for information spreading and the MTA was rather used to gain international attention. Consequently, for Hong Kong, one reason to participate is an international information flow but not a national one.

In Myanmar, the use of #MilkTeaAlliance was more commonly used to share information. Often paired with #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar the use was to gain international attention. Additionally, much of the information focussed on new developments such as the start of crackdowns and intensity thereof often including visual images (Na Gyi, 2021). Crackdowns

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in new areas (Na Gyi, 2021), updates about deaths and imprisonments from the protests (Wai Wai Nu, 2021), as well as other human rights violations e.g. the torture of prisoners were reported and shared (Women's Peace Network, 2021). Another prominent feature of information sharing is internet cut-outs (KiKi, 2021). Hence, social movements in Myanmar frequently used the MTA to document developments of the situation and spread information indicating that it was a reason for participation.

The MTA was used to share tactics and logistics. Hong Kong had developed tactics and spread them to other members. From the Hong Kong protests, a catalogue for social movements emerged and got spread. It includes extensive information about countering measurements of the police and military, such as tear gas and water cannons, tracking the police through maps, what to wear, and how to communicate (Jeff Chan, 2021). Next to protective gear such as umbrellas, helmets and glasses, a major strategy that Hong Kong made famous and passed on through the MTA is “be water”, as a way to escape police (펍피&Pods, 2020). Moreover, the MTA provided a space for another new development in the region, namely protest swapping. As explained in a tweet,

“HK protesters share Thai protest messages to help evade lèse majesté restrictions, while Thai protesters share HK protest material as a way to get around the national security law.” (Stand With Hong Kong, 2020)

Thus, Hong Kong enabled a beneficial spread of strategies among social movements in Asia which is a significant benefit of joining the Alliance.

In Myanmar, the sharing of tactics was at the beginning mainly receptive, and later their ideas equally spread to other social movements from the MTA. The ideas from Hong Kong quickly spread to Myanmar, only nine days after the military coup a whole catalogue containing tactics was posted (Jeff Chan, 2021). It was spread around by Myanmar people who urged their

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fellow protestors to learn from their ‘friends’ of the MTA and quickly adapt to respond as effectively as possible to the security forces (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021). Hence, participation in the MTA has benefitted Myanmar majorly by providing the protestors with tested tactics.

A lot of the newspaper articles that addressed the MTA noticed the similarity between the movements. Shared signals such as the three-finger salute and similar tactics were the main factors contributing to the visual comparability (McLaughlin, 2021). Tactics became visible in the gear of protesters such as gas masks, yellow helmets, umbrellas, goggles etc. Moreover, the movements and logistics of protests also resembled each other such as the protest swapping, ‘be water’ etc. (Reuters Staff, 2021) (Pierson, 2021). Lastly, the speed of technology and the usage of hashtags simplified the spread of knowledge (Chang, 2021). It was easy and quick to spread information from the scene to the region among social movements (Ting-Hsuan, 2021). Consequently, newspapers confirmed that tactics were shared which has positively influenced participation among social movements.

In sum, the sharing of information to gain international attention is one of the reasons for Myanmar and Hong Kong to participate in the MTA. Hereby, Hong Kong’s use of the MTA to share information was selective. Myanmar made more extensive use of the MTA. Additionally, for Myanmar receiving Hong Kong’s tactics was another reason to participate in the MTA. The existence of the newspaper articles and their mention of the similarities indicate that the movements had some degree of success in gaining attention internationally by using the same symbols.

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*Mobilization, social capital, and solidarity*

Mobilization and the formation of social capital are significant reasons to participate together. However, on the Twitter accounts and sites researched there is no evidence that a protest in Hong Kong was mobilized through the MTA on Twitter. Previous structures were likely used because the MTA emerged amid ongoing protests in Hong Kong. The only mobilizing aspect that was found in the case of Hong Kong is external mobilization such as the calls for other social movements to join the MTA. In other words, a build-up in social capital.

This build up in social capital is to increase international attention for national issues. The more social movements join the higher increase in the potential power of the MTA which leads Hongkongers to advertise the MTA regularly by stating its benefits and reaching out. One such example is India which was called to join based on common enemies (Joshua Wong, 2020) and also Myanmar where calls to keep supporting Myanmar supposed to maintain the momentum (Nathan Law, 2021). However, the national security law was passed in Hong Kong end of June 2020 and led activists to flee into exile or be imprisoned essentially putting the brakes on the social movement there. It follows, that Hongkongers seek to expand on their social capital through the MTA.

Myanmar is a successful example of extended social capital through the MTA. Thai people were quick to put forward Myanmar's national milk tea drink showing interest to expand their social capital (mhonism, 2021) and calling for support for Myanmar. This resulted in trust in the MTA and international attention, something Myanmar people desperately wanted (Civil Disobedience Movements, 2021) and Myanmar people responded by joining the Alliance (Poppy McPherson, 2021). Myanmar was an important expansion because they majorly reactivated the MTA by mobilizing largely through the MTA. The mobilization stretched from donations (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021), political activism (Students For Free Burma, 2021), and coordinated national to international protests in solidarity (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021)

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(Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021) (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021). The Twitter emoji launch almost three months after the coup shows that Myanmar has become a major member of the MTA and that Myanmar gained international attention (Twitter Public Policy, 2021). With the MTA the coup was automatically linked to other regional developments. Consequently, Myanmar revived the MTA.

Solidarity plays a central role in the accumulation of social capital in the region through the MTA. Whether it is coming from Hong Kong and Myanmar or for them, expressions of solidarity are central to the MTA and create a feeling of support for the members (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021) which makes it psychologically valuable. It is seen as an integral part of a chance of success to counter authoritarian regimes in the region and Chinese influence (Joshua Wong, 2020). Thus, the sense of solidarity in the MTA is reflective of the strength of social capital.

Mobilization, social capital, and solidarity correlate in the MTA. Reflective of the analysed tweets, many of the analysed articles write about solidarity repeatedly. They connect it with the enhanced possibilities of mobilization and the formation of social capital (Elemia, 2020) (Thaiger, 2020) (Chang, 2021) (McLaughlin, 2021) (Reuters Staff, 2021) (Ting-Hsuan, 2021). Solidarity seems to play such a vital role that the movement itself is considered a ‘pan-Asian solidarity movement’ (Reuters Staff, 2021). This reasserting solidarity builds social capital through online contact followed by subsequent mobilization of actions of solidarity towards common goals for the region (Ting-Hsuan, 2021) (Elemia, 2020). The result is international mobilization for the national cause through social capital and solidarity by both Myanmar and Hong Kong (Reuters Staff, 2021) (Chang, 2021) (Ting-Hsuan, 2021).

“It has united and mobilized the young in ways that would have been impossible for their parents and grandparents in capitals stretching from Bangkok to Manila” (Pierson, 2021).

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In other words, a transformation from online solidarity to offline mobilization (Chang, 2021) (Reuters Staff, 2021). Additionally, as the tweets suggested only Myanmar made use of the MTA for national mobilization such as raising goods in support of the protests (Frontier, 2021). Thus, Myanmar and Hong Kong differed in internal mobilization, but both were able to build solidarity and social capital through the MTA and to mobilize on which constitutes a major benefit for social movements.

In short, the analysis from both Twitter and newspaper articles agree that solidarity was shown through the MTA and social capital was built and maintained through it. These enabled international mobilizations for a national cause which is a reason to participate in the MTA. The MTA increased international attention by linking the struggles which enhance the chance of success for its members. Furthermore, Myanmar used the existing structures of the MTA for national mobilization.

### *Motivation*

Hong Kong received and motivated the MTA on Twitter. Hong Kong received support through encouraging words and international protests (Stand With Hong Kong, 2021) which makes Hongkongers feel less alone, highlighting the importance for them (Nathan Law, 2021). The empowerment becomes further visible in the art produced and shared by the Alliance (Stand With Hong Kong, 2021). Equally, Hongkongers shared motivation and support for other social movements visible through a hashtag commonly combined with the #MilkTeaAlliance, #StandWith (e.g., #StandWithThailand) and even used at protests in Hong Kong (Joshua Wong, 2020). Furthermore, the members motivated each other's to continue to fight because they are not alone and the human rights violations are being watched (Stand With Hong Kong, 2021) (Joshua Wong, 2020) (Nathan Law, 2020). Hereby, the power of the masses was repeatedly highlighted (Joshua Wong, 2020) (Stand With Hong Kong, 2021). Therefore, motivation and



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support were provided from and for Hong Kong which could delay the decline of the social movement and hence is a reason to participate.

Myanmar was receiving and providing motivation through the MTA. As discussed above Hong Kong was motivating Myanmar, but Myanmar received wide support and motivation from several members (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021). This widespread motivation led to further internal motivation in the Myanmar social movement (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021) (Wai Wai Nu, 2021). Moreover, Myanmar also returned the motivation to the other members (Milk Tea Alliance Burma, 2021) (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021) (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021), by making use of the #StandWith (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021). Hence, the motivation received was important in Myanmar's internal motivation and was equally spread to other social movements which is a benefit of participation.

Newspaper articles mention the support received from other social movements and the positive impact this had. This would include "increased awareness, attention and sympathy" (Elemia, 2020) shown by the tweets. One article even links the motivation to the solidarity shown (McLaughlin, 2021). Tweets with the #MilkTeaAlliance are more easily retweeted, and it increases the likelihood of them going viral (Chang, 2021) this provides a feeling of struggling together and being heard (Fung, 2020). The motivational aspect is beneficial for a social movement (Reuters Staff, 2021) which provides a reason for social movements to participate together in the Alliance.

To sum up, both Hong Kong and Myanmar received and spread motivation through the MTA. This motivation was essential in providing psychological support in difficult times. Additionally, Myanmar made use of external motivation to motivate the people within Myanmar's social movement. Thus, different from Hong Kong the similarity of Myanmar using the MTA for internal matters can be seen in motivational and mobilizing aspects.

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### *Constructed Relative Deprivation*

A major obstacle in participating together is the overcoming of the different grievances. As derived from the theoretical framework a possible reason is a shared grievance which in this case made for an anti-authoritarian/Chinese ideology. This constructed relative deprivation evolved at the start of the MTA. Among others, one early tweet from Oscaryee (2020) shows the harmful effects of Chinas Mekong Dams for the countries downstream where China is portrayed as the enemy. The tweet is posted by a person from Hong Kong, despite Hong Kong not being affected by the dams, but they gain from the support of other social movements against China. Hongkongers such as Joshua Wong (n.d.) equate anti-Chinese with anti-authoritarian which merged the two types of grievances from the region and formed a shared grievance that informs a common identity and ideology. Furthermore, Stand With Hong Kong (n.d.), Joshua Wong (n.d.) and Nathan Law (n.d.) problematize the belt and road initiative which for them is a symbol of Chinese led globalization. Subsequently, the MTA is opposing this power grab. The shared experiences of suffering under authoritarian rule and Chinas influence are the factors glueing the MTA together.

The effect of the constructed relative deprivation is visible in the case of Myanmar. The construction of relative deprivation started before Myanmar joined the Alliance. Initially, Myanmar identified with a pro-democracy grievance, and they noticed that they were not the only ones in the region (Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar, 2021). Indeed, standing together to fight for democracy is how Myanmar people saw the MTA (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021) (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021) meaning that their grievance was first a predominantly national one, the loss of democracy. However, it gradually evolved towards an anti-China grievance. The starting point was a flight from China to Myanmar, showing Chinas support of the military according to the Twitter community (ICEICE, 2021). The blockage of UN condemnation by China further fuelled the construction of the relative deprivation through the MTA (Ro Nay San

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Lwin, 2021) (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021). However, while Hongkongers are purely anti-China, Myanmar people still seemed to believe in reasoning and communicating with China (Kyaw Win, 2021). Myanmar is a clear example of how differences in grievances were overcome with a shared grievance, ideology, and identity.

The newspaper articles describe the constructed relative deprivation of the MTA reflecting what has been analysed from Twitter. The sentiment is a defining part of the MTA and that the hashtag itself is seen as a symbol of being anti-authoritarian or anti-Chinese (Thaiger, 2020). This constructed relative deprivation is what made a difference to prior movements (Wu, 2021). The development of the constructed relative deprivation and the impact it had been noted, namely the increased participation in the alliance (McLaughlin, 2021). The Alliance results from a growing wave of authoritarianism in the region which despite having different struggles in each country is met by activists with shared anti-authoritarianist ideology (Chang, 2021). Furthermore, the overcoming of differences between the movements provides them with the benefit of increased political leverage (Ting-Hsuan, 2021). In this environment, the MTA gives the opportunity to “internationalize the home-grown protest movements” (Fung, 2020). Therefore, the articles agree on the association of the anti-Chinese and anti-authoritarian sentiment with the MTA.

Reed and White (2021) noticed the offline impact such constructed relative deprivation could have with the increased anti-China sentiment in Myanmar. The fact that China called the coup a “major reshuffling of the parliament” and blocked any UN support or decision on the topic fuelled the anti-China grievance in Myanmar significantly. According to The Frontier (2021), some rumours emerged from the anti-China sentiment. As mentioned in the tweets an aeroplane that arrived in Myanmar in February was believed to carry Chinese IT specialists that would help the military build a firewall. This claim is not proven until today and might be a result of negative attitudes, but it did further ignite the anti-China attitude. This event even led

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to actions against China's economic interests (Frontier, 2021). Consequently, the case of Myanmar shows that the impact the constructed relative deprivation had on the social movement is quite powerful and reaches into the offline sphere through mobilization.

### *Additional findings*

Three additional reasons have been found. Firstly, the internally unifying power of the MTA was a reason to participate for Myanmar's social movement. Myanmar is a country with deep ethnic cleavages that are especially prominent with the Rohingyas. An ethnic minority that suffers from ethnic cleansing and other atrocities by the military for decades. They have no citizenship and are discriminated against by a majority of the population. Despite this, Rohingyas tweeted images of them drinking milk tea in the camps stating their support for the Alliance. They were asking to be included based on their shared hate for dictators (Hossain, 2021), indicating that the shared grievance was internally unifying. Myanmar people reacted with an apology and a promise that they would stand with the Rohingyas (The Rohingya Post, 2021). Solidarity with the Rohingyas was expressed and mobilized a protest demanding justice for the Rohingyas by other ethnic groups (Yasmin Ullah, 2021). Furthermore, these have opened a wider debate about the position of ethnic minorities in Myanmar (Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar, 2021). Indeed, one of the newspaper articles confirms that the changes in views of the Rohingyas were significant and acted internally unifying which was enabled by the MTA (Ting-Hsuan, 2021). Therefore, the MTA and its constructed relative deprivation were able to reduce internal differences by opening the possibility to share a grievance and ideology and identify with a shared relative deprivation.

Secondly, the MTA facilitated an alternative to ASEAN. The regional organization was repeatedly criticised in tweets related to the MTA in Myanmar for inviting the military government to the meetings (Wai Wai Nu, 2021) (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021) and for not

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obstructing the Rohingya genocide (Yasmin Ullah, 2021). In tweets, ASEAN is viewed as consisting of governments that are not representative of the people. In return, people in Myanmar were not identifying with ASEAN and felt left without international support. Moreover, they felt the organization was rather representing their enemies and legitimizing the military (Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 2021) (Wai Wai Nu, 2021). This resulted in attempting to organize the international support required through the MTA which would include pressure and critique on the governments. Hence, the Alliance is perceived as filling the vacuum on the international and regional support that the people want (Civil Disobedience Movement, 2021) (Wai Wai Nu, 2021). The most retweeted post analysed captures the essence of the sentiment by stating “In milk tea we trust.” (Maerzli, 2020).

Newspaper articles have recognized this sentiment in various ways. Whether they notice that the MTA provides a platform for international support to fight local authoritarian regimes (Ting-Hsuan, 2021) or that ASEAN is perceived as rather supporting the authoritarian regimes (Frontier, 2021). Chia and Singer (2021) state the capability of the MTA to shape politics and represent the people of the region. The article supports its point by referring to the clear stance the MTA has on recognizing the NUG in Myanmar and at the same time scrutinizing it. For example, the MTA pressured the NUG to recognize the Rohingyas which the NUG pledged to do in a statement. This article concludes that the MTA offers an alternative to ASEAN for young people which constitutes another reason to participate.

Thirdly, according to Pierson (2021) and Reuters Staff (2021) a demographic plays a role. The young generations experienced a relatively democratic period in several countries where social movements participate. Especially Generation Z, which is mostly associated with the MTA and has a higher affinity to social media, grew up with hopes for a more democratic future. Significant was also the higher amount of access to international information through

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social media. These technological and demographic differences could explain how differences are perceived to be less and are a reason for a higher grievance.

In sum, several additional benefits and reasons for participation were identified. Internally unifying power in the country-specific social movements and an alternative to ASEAN as a mechanism of international attention and accountability are further benefits of the MTA. Lastly, a generation that grew up relatively democratic and with access to wide information through the internet seems to be more aware of the regional issues, explaining participation in the MTA.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, the theory informed some of the possible benefits of participating in an international social movement. Some are applicable to explain why social movements are participating in the MTA and others were not identified. The initiation of the social movements in Hong Kong and Myanmar was done without the MTA. Hong Kong and Myanmar differ in the way they spread information, more specifically the former used the MTA selectively while the latter used it more frequently to share information. Indicating that for Hongkongers the benefit was to raise awareness of specific topics such as the construction of an anti-Chinese grievance. Especially, the sharing of tactics from Hong Kong through the MTA was a major benefit to the social movements. However, Hong Kong also benefitted from this exchange with the method of protest swapping and by strengthening anti-Chinese sentiment and movements in the region. Furthermore, solidarity, motivation, and the formation of social capital were benefits identified in tweets and newspaper articles for both Hong Kong and Myanmar.

An interplay of a constructed relative deprivation and benefits explains why social movements with different grievances in Asia participate together in the MTA. By combining

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relative deprivation theory and constructivism the theoretical framework provided an explanation for overcoming different grievances among social movements. This explanation was mostly confirmed in the analysis. What the analysis shows is that Myanmar, a social movement that joined later is incorporating the constructed relative deprivation more, compared to a social movement that constructed the relative deprivation such as Hong Kong. Consequently, the constructed relative deprivation was able to set a precedent in the region where social movements added onto their national grievance with a common international or regional grievance and thus overcame the difference in grievances and participated in the MTA.

The MTA had several other benefits. Firstly, the internally unifying power by sharing grievance that provides identity options beyond ethnic divides. Secondly, the MTA in Myanmar developed partly into a body that scrutinized the governments and built pressure which resulted from distrust and frustration with ASEAN that was perceived as rather supporting the opposing side. Moreover, some newspaper articles suggest, that a relatively open period especially with the developments in technology have changed the mindset of the new participating generation. Overall, the MTA has several benefits that explain participation as well as a constructed relative deprivation that build up a shared grievance, ideology, and identity. This was necessary to overcome different grievances and participate in the MTA.

The MTA had an effect on parts of the life cycle of social movements. The emergence was not affected, the coalescence was influenced by a constructed relative deprivation and profited from benefits, the bureaucratization stage was largely skipped, and the decline was likely prolonged. Despite these positive impacts, the MTA cannot record any major success. Furthermore, the flattening of the hierarchy within the social movement does not occur to the extent the techno-optimists predict, because famous figures have more followers and retweets and continue to be important drivers of the social movements.

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Further research should be done on the risks that the MTA brought with it and its long-term success. Moreover, research should be done on the developing situation, the durability, and the offline impact as well as the Chinese perspective on the matter. The importance of this topic is expected to increase and with it the amount of online social movements. The role of social media and especially the differences between different platforms is important to continually research. For example, Twitter seems to take stance on the situation by creating an emoji, while Facebook is more held back at the time of writing. Additionally, the role of comedy that was very present in the MTA would be important to research. Furthermore, researching the MTA from several perspectives such as a psychological one could be valuable.

The research has several limitations in addition to the ones stated in the methodology section. Firstly, my knowledge of the languages is limiting the research. Secondly, because of the word limit and time constraints, only a limited amount of data was covered, and topics could not be explored in full depth. The word limit did not allow me to research possible but less successful reasons such as boycotts. Moreover, the events are developing and thus this research only reflects events up until the formulation date. Lastly, my citizenship, upbringing, and education in Europe naturally impact my view on the topic.



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