The Milk Tea Alliance as Internationalizing Protest

Ariel Blenkitni [1]* ID ✉ **, Jordan Alexander Forehand** [2] ✉

[1] Institute of Political Science at the National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

[2] St. Dominic's Catholic School, Kaohsiung, Taiwan

* Corresponding Author, © Authors

Abstract

The Milk Tea Alliance movement acted as a tacit alliance linking pro-democracy advocates uniting citizens across Asia. The loose collective is a reaction to authoritarianism, whether internal, as in the case of Myanmar's civil war, or regional, as with the relationship between China and its neighbors. This loose ideological association uses social media to promote their message and collaborate with other democratic activists, transcending international borders. This analysis seeks to uncover whether the movement internationalized domestic protest movements' solidarism to promote democratic values through mobilizing attention, amplifying popular cross-border opposition. Combing through Facebook's corpus to temporally track participation behavior, this research questions whether the internationalization of domestic democratization movements represents instrumentalized exploitation of the popularity of trending hashtags, or rather represents a more integrative form of nonreciprocal solidaristic participation, potentially symbolizing the inculcation of universalist democratic values in an international protest movement that could outlive domestic opposition. The findings suggest that the majority of international participatory behavior occurred irrespective of the domestic state political situations of participants, and was therefore largely nonreciprocal. Thus, the Milk-Tea Alliance apparently represents a case of effective transnational solidarity.

Introduction

In 2020, Science posed a question as to "whether citizen movements alone—absent external support—are sufficient to check newly emboldened autocrats (Hyde)." The natural corollary of this question is how those movements seek out and institutionalize this external support. An ideal test case for this is the recent period of democratic unraveling in Asia that has led to a regional push against authoritarianism. Perhaps because of the ineffectiveness of these domestic movements, they have gradually merged their symbols to become a cross-national and collective struggle, appearing to consolidate resources to provide institutionalized popular external support in the form of a shared movement. Beginning in Thailand during their first wave of protests in 2020 against the military junta, a tacit alliance between Thai protesters and supporters from Hong Kong and Taiwan emerged, in what would be called the "Milk Tea Alliance." This movement would later stretch to encompass political events in India and Myanmar, eventually expanding to include mutual mobilization across the entire region, and would eventually include solidaristic participation from across the world.

Democracy-minded activists in these countries provided mutual support for one another, and this new form of mobilization largely took place in the digital space. This support took the form of sharing advocacy and drawing attention to turmoil in affected states through hashtags, news, and memes. While there were of course elements of shared focus, the ultimate question that must be posited in the wake of this apparently transnational action was whether these novel forms of digital mobilization and resource sharing constitute what has been called instrumentalized action (Pilny & Shumate, 2012) in the form of hashtag sharing just to garner attention for parochial domestic issues, or rather solidarity unconditional of reciprocal transnational participation representing common values (Bob, 2018; Robin-D'Cruz, 2019) such as international democracy and human rights.

The initial formation of this loose coalition is attributed to Thai actor, Vachirawit Chiva-aree, coming under attack from Chinese netizens after his girlfriend, "Nevvy," of the eponymous hashtag, posted an Instagram photo in which she tacitly implied that Taiwan and China are two different countries. This led to a vitriolic backlash amongst Chinese online activists, who began lambasting the Thai government, followed by a counterreaction in Thailand. Thai netizens, for their part, quickly rallied against the attacks with digital mobilization, which were initially primarily confined to Instagram and Weibo. This led to millions of posts, and billions of impressions, along with a swift backlash from the greater public who opposed what they saw as indirect Chinese censorship outside the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Due to a degree of cultural proximity, as well as a shared heritage of victims of authoritarianism, online users from Hong Kong and Taiwan quickly joined ranks with the Thai people in demonstrating opposition to what they perceived as the PRC throwing its weight around. The three countries, through their cooperation, quickly formed a tacit alliance to oppose what they viewed as Chinese aggression. This opposition quickly came to encompass more than just anti-PRC speech, and rather began to grow into a broader movement characterized by anti-authoritarianism, and pan-Asian democratic idealism.

Within a month, a group of users from India joined the movement just preceding the China-India border skirmishes which began in early 2020. This was followed by participation beginning in Taiwan, perhaps related to a push for non-UN member Taiwan to be admitted to the UN-based World Health Assembly against the wishes of the PRC. After this, the slow trickle of the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance began to be observed on various social media websites. Support from the Philippines soon emerged, and even places far removed from the Southeast and East Asian region, including the UK and Germany, became prolific in their echoing of hashtags related on social media.

One of the last countries in the region to join the movement, and eventually becoming the biggest contributors in the form of posting and engagement, was Myanmar. Myanmar serves as a test case for the theory of instrumentalization of the movement, as their participation and co-optation of the hashtag only occurred after the coup in their own country in 2021. This timing is, perhaps, suggestive that their participation was more opportunistic than the apparently solidaristic participation of citizens in other states who joined earlier, or had no direct stakes in the outcome of the movement. While this potential self interestedness does not dilute the impact and additional reach that Myanmar's joining of the Milk Tea Alliance provided for the proliferation of the overall pro-democratic advocacy, it raises a large question over whether such national

responses represent a form of sustainable solidarism if only linked to parochial domestic self-interest and not bridging values. Thus, this research aims to determine whether the movement represented true solidaristic behavior characteristic of a shared transnational movement concerned with the outcomes of one another, represented by participation irrespective of domestic political upheaval, or rather existed as a collection of contemporaneous individual domestic movements that simply exploited the shared label as an opportunity to gain international support for their respective causes. The importance of this question can not be easily overstated, as the transnational nature of movements has the potential to ensure ideological survival beyond the borders of the state where they originate, with such movements threatening to outlive regimes themselves.

Theory and Background

In the last several decades with the advent of the internet and rapid global communication networks, social movement typologies have broadened and changed their modes of mobilization and action (Schmitz et al., 2020). This has expanded to include the concept of the "transnational social movement," with these movements and their ideas by definition cross national boundaries with "appeals to international norms or alliances [which] can bring international pressure to bear on states, thereby altering the balance of power in national political contests (Smith, 2013)." Their conceptual basis resembles the archetypal terrorist organization: with a safe haven outside international borders and the pressure of the citizenry of multiple states on a domestic government scrutinizing the grievances, movements could more resistant to domestic suppression if they have transnational backing (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Definitionally, even if a movement simply receives tacit backing from

abroad could qualify it as transnational, but these parameters exclusive of directionality can not distinguish between instrumentalized support confined to a limited context or value-based support that has no expectation of reciprocation and can therefore be considered nonreciprocal (Bob, 2018).

This is particularly true if the aims pursued by supporters in different states are primarily related to local conflicts, rather than based on shared normative values. The Arab Spring represents an example of this alternative instrumentalized model, an ostensibly transnational movement with parallel goals of deposing local autarchs, albeit one whose participant state citizens hardly interacted, and thus acted largely autonomously and with little transnational cooperation. For many of the participants, movement aims though were not focused on regional action in terms of applying international pressure on autocratic regimes as a whole, or even on democratization, but instead on domestic actors in the respective states capitalizing off of the opportunity to seize power. The momentum of crumbling autarchies in neighboring states, as well as emerging norms against killing protestors in favor of abdication enabled political mobilization. However, what was labeled by some as a transnational social movement because it had some shared ideals (Sadiki, 2016), had its labels questioned by others because "what counts in a social movement is the existence of vectors of mobilization along existing or newly formed networks" but it is not necessarily clear that this occurred in any substantial way during the Arab Spring (Smith, 2013; Lafi, 2017). In the recent case of the Milk Tea Alliance its vectors of mobilization certainly constituted novel shared networks, as opposed to simply marketing their parallel individual aims and sharing a common hashtag. However, some have suggested that the Milk-tea Alliance movement was not monolithic in its push for liberalization,

claiming that it was not purely regarding the fight between democratization and entrenching authoritarianism, but that it instead included elements of domestic grievances against China (Dedman & Lai, 2021; Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021). This research can not parse every element within the movement, but instead attempts to measure whether those mobilization vectors appeared exploitative and instrumentalized, or rather nonreciprocal and solidaristic.

If movements are not truly transnational and cooperative, with shared ideological grounding, mobilization, and resource pooling, then the pressure they bring to bear on regimes ends at their borders. If the opposite is true and they are acting collectively and solidaristically with shared focus, then a truly transnational movement reflects deeper societal uniformity and there is greater potential for burden-sharing in pressuring autocratic regimes, which can potentially even outlive a specific movement within the borders of a country. The participation trends of the Milk Tea Alliance movement will henceforth be examined to gauge the degree of international solidarism and temporal homogeneity.

The last several years have seen an explosion of literature positing similar requisitions regarding the underlying ideological underpinnings of digital mobilization. This included the use of interviews (Chan, 2023; Phalapong, 2022), and broadly summarizing the changes in the mobilization landscape brought about by so called "transnational networks" on social media (Ponglamjiak, 2021, Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021; Huang and Svetanant, 2022). The present research aims to utilize the largest and most prolific social media service in the region and across the world to quantify the national differences in activism during this movement on a temporal scale to clearly measure the timing and degree of participation of the involved countries. From this, a better degree of determination can be made regarding whether

the Milk Tea Alliance simply involved instrumentalized hashtag sharing to increase likes, or whether it involved nonreciprocal cross-border solidarity based on shared values.

Modern protest movements in the East Asian milieu are not uniformly common throughout the region, and are often tied to domestic constraints and culture in each respective state. Even in the post-colonial and post-revolutionary eras in Asia, due to the persistence of autocratic behavior, contentious mass movements proliferated during opportune periods of state weakness in elite regimes, including the Taiwanese 228 Incident in 1947 and the Formosa Incident in 1979, the ROK Gwangju Uprising in 1980, the Philippines' People Power Revolution in 1986, and the riots that led to the fall of Suharto in 1998. In the last two decades though, this has expanded to online mobilization which is cheaper, quicker and more penetrating than traditional methods, and has led to a new wave of movements (De & Thakur, 2016). This has manifested in largescale and potent outbursts such as the multiparty Bersih Movement for cleaner election in Malaysia (Radue, 2012), the extremely largescale Umbrella Movement for democratization in Hong Kong (Blenkitni, 2023), the massive 2012 Delhi Rape Protests (Nigam, 2014), and the Sunflower Movement which stood against the Taiwanese ROC government forming closer relations with the PRC, specifically through a trade pact (Szu-chien, 2017). Over time, these movements have become increasingly reliant on digital mobilization efforts to not only share information about live demonstrations, but effectively advocate outside the physical space of their respective polities.

The Milk Tea Alliance began in 2020 as triggered by the innocuous posting of two Thai celebrities, Vachirawit "Bright" Cheva-aree and his girlfriend "Nnevvy," which took on political dimensions as they challenged the PRC sovereign worldview by referring to both Hong Kong and

Taiwan as entities separate from China. The reactive response of the PRC was a vitriolic anti-Thai response, targeting Thai institutions and focusing on their new monarch, a large taboo as Lèse-majesté is still a crime in Thailand (Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021). Much of this took place on Western-controlled social media, which is still inaccessible to most in China, suggesting that some interactions may have been sanctioned or conducted by the Chinese state. The twist that took place was that many Thai netizens were at the time disillusioned with their government and took the insults in stride. They were also joined by Hong Kongers and Taiwanese confederates thankful that Thai netizens had defended their statements that had been seen as pro-Taiwanese and pro-Hong Kong, even against aggressive Chinese pushback.

In October 2020, Morrison Lee Meng-chu (李孟居), a Taiwanese activist who disappeared while visiting China, made his first appearance since he had vanished in China in 2019, making a televised forced confession. The PRC claimed he engaged in activities that endangered national security, mirroring the high profile detention of Lee Ming-che two years prior, and sparking the Taiwanese government to warn against traveling across the strait to the PRC. This humiliating coercion led netizens to post on social media in protest of what they viewed as a wrongful and politicized arrest and exploitation by Beijing, demanding Lee's immediate release.

Another incident in the same month between Taiwanese and PRC officials involved Fiji, with the Taiwanese government saying that Chinese embassy officials had crashed a Taiwanese Foreign Ministry event. On October 8th 2020, Taiwanese officials visiting Fiji were holding a celebration for the ROC National Day when Chinese officials showed up. An argument and scuffle allegedly broke out sending one Taiwanese

staffer to the hospital with a head injury, and also injuring one Chinese official (BBC, 2020). This likewise sent many Taiwanese online to protest against what they thought was PRC imperialist behavior, just as Chinese foreign ministers appeared on television and rebuked Taiwanese officials for holding the aforementioned ROC national day celebrations at all.

At times during the relatively short period of operation, the movement has had a natural ebb and flow in terms of engagement, growing towards the first zenith at the end of 2020, and then evaporating quickly. In February 2021, despite relative domestic peace in Taiwan and across the strait, the coup in Myanmar that occurred on the first of February of 2021 coincided with a rapid spike in social media activity related to the Milk Tea Alliance, with participation well distributed across Asia. Across the region, while countries like Taiwan and the Philippines faced pressure from external sources and in particular the PRC, states like Thailand and Myanmar have faced internal violence as state security services target their own citizens, leading to particularly high levels of dissent, and consequently Milk Tea Alliance participation. Thai protesters were met with physically violent reprisals from the local police (Sombatpoonsiri, 2021), while citizens of Myanmar have been openly subject to extrajudicial killings and street violence by the junta government (Prasse-Freeman, 2023). Many in Myanmar are currently engaged in what amounts to a civil war against the military government. At the beginning of 2021 with the launch of the coup in Myanmar that ousted then State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, the online presence of, and engagement with, the movement once again was invigorated, propelled upwards by nearly all major states within the alliance, whose transnational solidarism increased the number of interactions multiple fold.

Myanmar's military coup officially occurred on 1 February 2021, which quickly spurred netizens in the country to begin participating in the Milk Tea Alliance. On Facebook and Instagram, the country doubled the next closest country in terms of raw engagement. As the military junta in Myanmar has grown more violent in its actions, the calls for solidarity and assistance from citizens from Myanmar have only grown more vocal in calling for international action, spurring the search for solidarity from activist circles including those engaged in the Milk Tea Alliance.

The Milk Tea Alliance and hashtag may have originated in Thailand, but was adopted by netizens in polities across the region. Some were likely genuinely interested in universal values, but perhaps others who had their own grievances and may have attempted to instrumentally use the hashtag to increase the salience of their own messages regarding their own conflicts, rather than expressing value-based solidarity. The larger question of the Milk Tea Alliance, as a whole, remains whether this movement fits the paradigm of a true solidaristic transnational movement based on a shared set of norms, or rather whether it was opportunistically utilized by neighboring states only when they sought to increase the visibility of their own internal struggles. The distinction may be methodologically difficult to parse, but can now be examined with temporal and geographic tracking of social media posts across the movement to examine how individual state-level national usages of the hashtag trans-cended the domestic political troubles in each host country to allow for forms of transnational mobilization that were more solidaristic than opportunistic.

Methodology

To examine movement trends to measure the degree of nonreciprocal solidarism versus instrumental exploitation of the hashtag, a corpus was formed encompassing the majority of the movement's high profile text, defined by Crowdtangle as attracting over 100 interactions or more. This was then examined across states and across time to examine whether movement participation in countries reflected their own need for promotion due to domestic disturbances, or rather followed external developments. This is crucial for determining whether this solidarism is stable across time and borders, especially in polities like Hong Kong or Myanmar in which the state apparatus aims to suppress dissenting discourse.

Facebook, controlled by Meta, is the primary global social media network, but this is especially true in Asia where free access to the platform is often offered to those even without formal data service connections (Roth, 2022). Using Meta's Crowdtangle data processing system, which has a strong track record in tracking social movements (Darius & Urquhart, 2021); (Frischlich, 2022); (Kim & Lee, 2022) and so-called "hashtag activism (Alperstein, 2022), this research utilized a corpus including all public Facebook social media posts with the phrase "milkteaalliance" recorded by Facebook Crowdtangle during the time frame of this analysis, with data from 1 May 2016 to 31 August 2022, a corpus totalling 336,622 posts. This phrase was included without spaces to make use of the hashtag functionality. Posts were sorted by state using the country of the majority of administrators (labelled admins in data) for the posting page or person, for which under Facebook, both Hong Kong and Taiwan are coded as distinct entities from the PRC. Python was utilized to both process the corpus of posts and perform trend analysis. The total interactions, including likes and other Facebook reactions for each post, were calculated to gauge the degree of public engagement with the posts in their respective countries. Because of significant language and cultural differences between the participant

states, other than the proportion of posts written in English and thus more geared towards international audiences, it can be assumed that the majority of posts made by accounts in a specific country are aimed at informing and mobilizing domestic audiences. Therefore, the engagement rates on posts made by accounts in a specific country are seen to be a reflection on the participation intensity as well as a metric of overall engagement in that respective country. As such, these metrics were used to track increases in both activity and engagement after major political events in the region, and included hashtag diffusion across countries

One final methodological limitation is that because of fear of reprisals, inevitably a cohort of activists have either fled abroad, or shifted their social media locations to avoid detection by local authorities. Thus, the locations provided to Meta by those admins may not accurately reflect where some of the included interactions are sourced. This means that there may be a degree data bias away from Milk Tea core countries and towards extraregional states. This may be especially true for certain polities like Hong Kong with strong ties to outside powers such as the UK, however, it does not seem to be the case for states such as Myanmar, which is relatively isolated.

Theoretically, if participation in the movement is only opportunistically instrumental, and not tied to solidarism, then individual state level participation signified by engagement and use of the hashtag and associated messaging should be tied to major moments of domestic unrest, and less tethered to events abroad. If there is bridging transnational normative solidarism however, participation trends should not reflect domestic turmoil, but rather should be more reflective of events abroad.

Figure 1
Interactions on the Facebook platform over the course of the movement plotted logarithmically
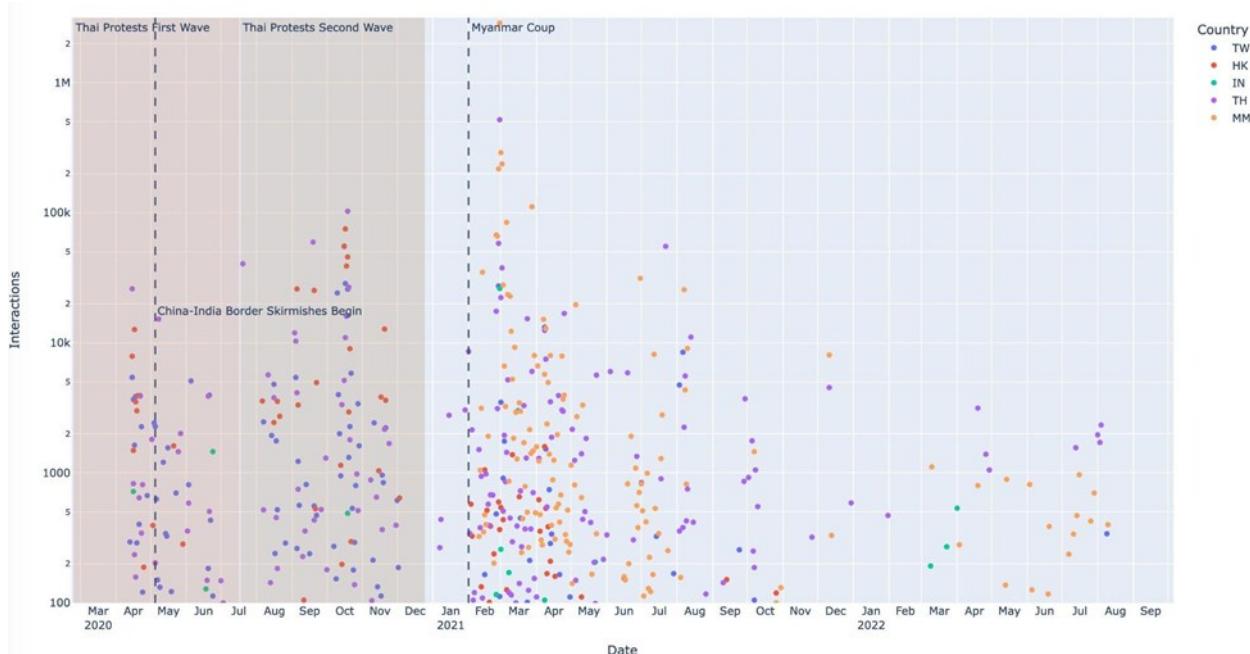
Note: Each point represents the interaction/day total for posts emanating from accounts tied to each of the five participant countries listed above, for each day with total daily country interaction sums over 100. The large notches in the interaction scale on the Y-axis increase logarithmically. Country codes: TW: Taiwan, HK: Hong Kong, IN: India, TH: Thailand, MM: Myanmar. For an interactive high resolution form of both figures, see the appendix for the URL.

Data

National level data shows that while the overall primary sources of engagement were contained in posts disseminated by accounts tied to the core countries of the Milk Tea Alliance, including Myanmar, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also included non-participant states.

These outside countries include countries ranked by Freedom House as more democratic including the Philippines, as well as flawed democracies like Malaysia and Singapore. The effects of the movement also apparently spread to users outside of Asia, in particular large democratic states like the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK.

Figure 2
Heatmap of total sums by country over the entire course of the movement
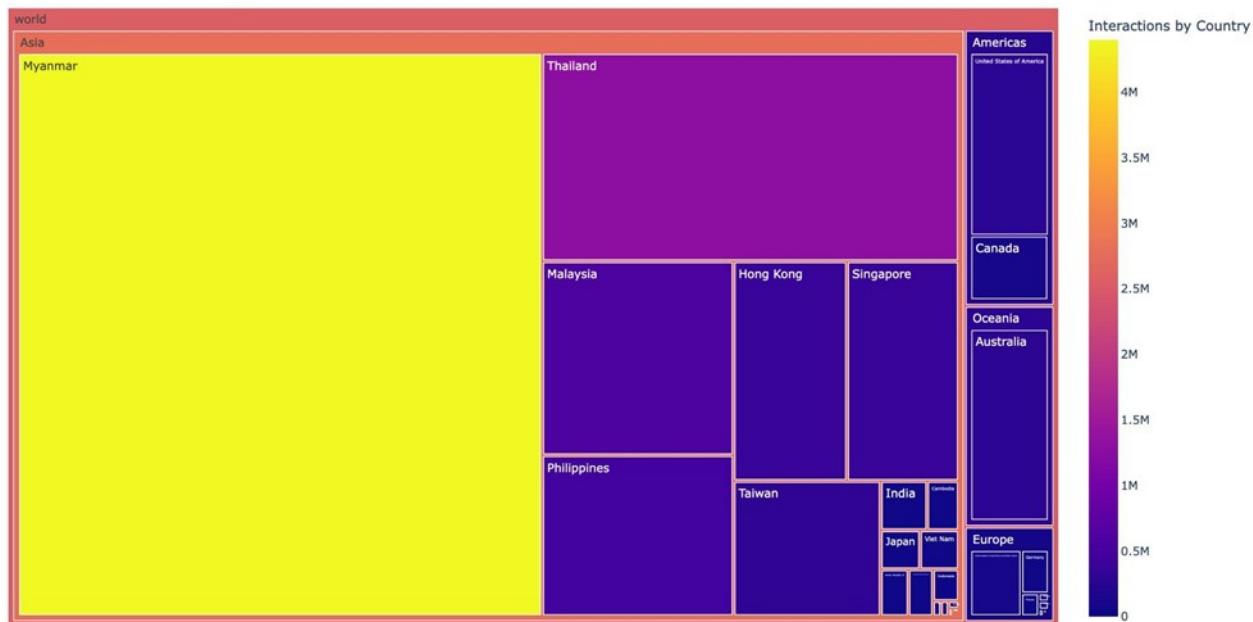
Note: The size and color represent the total interactions by country, and each country is sorted by continent in a nested format. For an interactive high resolution form of both figures, see the appendix for the URL.

Being that the movement emanated from Thailand originally, interactions from Thailand dominate in early data from 2020, with the state's users being the most numerically prolific in reacting to posts regarding the Milk Tea Alliance. This is true despite this hashtag's definition alluding to international solidarity, and not specifically to any domestic turmoil. This rapidly shifted by Spring 2020 when Hong Kong linked accounts encountered nearly as many interactions as in Thailand, a country whose population is nearly ten times its size. This period coincided with the waning months of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protest Movement as the physical security situation there changed rapidly. While the instances of, and interactions with, the hashtag on Hong Kong social media were similar

in content to Thailand, possibly reflecting a cooperative spirit and opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, the duration of such their posting has ultimately proved shorter lived. Taiwan during this period of early to mid 2020 exhibited tens of thousands of post interactions, with the highest levels of engagement in October 2020 and February 2021. Taiwan maintained consistently high levels of participation throughout the period of analysis, despite no imminent direct threat, or domestic turmoil. Taiwanese netizens were one of the initial and primary participant polities, and yet stood to gain less from publicizing Milk Tea Alliance related conflicts than many other states, making this case unique.

In the fall of 2020, all of the countries that contemporaneously comprised the Milk Tea Alliance, aside from India, grew in their support for the alliance on social media. This support only continued to grow until late October. In the fall of 2020 the interactions for all countries dropped precipitously in a lull, before skyrocketing in early 2021, coinciding with the coup d'etat of the military junta in Myanmar. At the same time interactions in Myanmar hit their zenith, so did the interactions from Thailand, while interactions from India also hit their highest throughout the entire period of measurement, while Hong Kong also saw a minor resurgence during this period in early 2021.

Looking at this period of 2021 as a whole, at the beginning of the year, when the coup in Myanmar took place, we can observe what appears to demonstrate the growth of nonreciprocal transnational participation. This form of solidaristic camaraderie can be seen in multiple periods throughout the existence of the alliance, the first instance of this coming in the initial Thai protests that saw support from Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as India. As time progressed, all of these dropped off to a degree, with the exceptions of Thailand, Hong Kong, and India, which continued to grow over the summer. However, almost all of the Milk Tea Alliance states saw an increase in interactions moving into the fall of 2021.

Figure 2 indicates that since the beginning, a degree of solidaristic participation has certainly existed between the primary core countries, and persisted for years after the creation of the hashtag. Despite the fact that Hong Kong's protests died down at the end of 2020, their interaction volumes have been amongst the highest for any polity on these platforms and did not slow until late 2021. India's participation also predated the beginning of the China-India border skirmishes, with its highest participation numbers

during the time of the coup in Myanmar, although the degree of their participation was still more limited than Southeast Asian states. This suggests that despite its smaller share, that India also exhibited nonreciprocal solidaristic behavior.

Figure 1, Thailand, from which the Milk Tea Alliance was birthed, has largely maintained the top spot in terms of engagement. Around the fourth wave of the Thai protests, at the end of 2021, interactions began to drop off. This is precisely the point when Myanmar superseded all other members of the Milk Tea Alliance in terms of interactions, with their participation trends reaching a new peak.

After this period of intense interaction, interactions leveled off. Since 2022 levels of interaction have mostly remained steady, though most of the interactions have come from Myanmar and Thailand, followed by India and then Taiwan.

In terms of overall interactions, visualized in Figure 2, Myanmar-based account's posts clearly hold the bulk of the interactions, totalling well over four million. With all Asian accounts comprising a total of nearly eight million interactions total, Myanmar maintains a stark global plurality in terms of participation. This figure is even more impressive when taking into account that Myanmar's full scale involvement in the Milk Tea Alliance was largely delayed until early 2021. The next highest country in terms of its post interactions is Thailand, which was the original catalyst for the alliance, totalling a total interaction count of 1.29 million. Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan each totalled more than 100,000 interactions on their posts. Other Asian countries recording at least 50,000 interactions included India, Cambodia, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, Laos, Indonesia, China, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

Myanmar's temporal interaction trend, as displayed in Figure 1, raises the largest questions over movement instrumentalization. Prior to

their coup, interactions from Myanmar were so low that they didn't even register in the data, with relevant Milk Tea Alliance posts all attracting less than 100 reactions each. However, once the domestic threat of authoritarianism and violence reared its head, the country became one of the most consistently and heavily involved in the alliance, surpassing all other participant populations with their post reaction rates. The only exception to this was over the summer months of 2022, when they dropped below Thailand in terms of interactions.

Analysis

The Milk Tea Alliance clearly succeeded in its aims to establish a so-called "Transnational Advocacy Network" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) to garner international support and mobilize attention for embattled citizens acting under the restraints of repressive regimes. In responding to authoritarian retrenchment in Thailand against the government installed after the 2014 coup, responding to the military coup in Myanmar, or challenging authoritarian creep or influence campaigns from the PRC within Taiwan, Hong Kong, or India, the movement established an informal confederation of democracy-oriented dissenters raising the profile of turmoil in their respective polities. They used the hashtag and its momentum to express solidarity support for one another and for democracy, and to share news, updates, and grievances from the front lines of those disputes. From those in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar, laws restricting the ability to express dissent against those regimes meant that by maintaining a safe third space online with the cooperation of international allies, pressure brought to bear would not let up as easily.

That being said, without speculating on the multidimensional goals of the individuals involved in the movement perhaps numbering in the hundreds of thousands, there is still a question as to whether the trends of participation demonstrated instrumental hashtag sharing protocols designed to multiply attention, or whether there was a phenomenon of solidaristic value-based nonreciprocal transnational participation. This analysis has highlighted several key participation features strongly suggestive of a solidaristic internationalized movement. This includes what appears to be clearly nonreciprocal behavior, including participation from users in many key states such as Taiwan, India, Hong Kong, and Thailand, whose temporal participation trends were largely dissociated from domestic political events.

Taiwan represents one of the best cases for nonreciprocal participation, with large profile content sharing related to Thailand, not Taiwan, and higher participation during external political events than domestic ones. The best demonstration of non-instrumental use is a measured spike in engagement on Taiwanese posts in early August 2021 in what temporally seems to be related to events outside of Taiwan, namely the Fourth wave of the 2020-2021 Thai protests. At that time, there was a ramp up in street action and police responses at the end of July and early August of 2021. Interactions with "milkteaalliance" posts increased during this period, as did solidarity signals on posts from accounts in Taiwan, specifically including posts bearing the hashtag "#WhatsHappeningInThailand," which ultimately demonstrated relatively high engagement. Notably, despite the subsequent spike in PLA inclusions into Taiwan's ADIZ, which hit all time highs in the following period, interactions after this period dropped significantly in Taiwan. This seems to suggest that for certain actors, including participants in Taiwan, attention seeking from external activists may not have been the primary motivation for participation in the movement.

India showed high participation both before and long after the border skirmishes with China, and again mostly tied to external events, strongly

suggestive of their ideological engagement with the movement and not instrumental exploitation. Indian participation long outlived the India-PRC border clashes in 2020, with high interaction numbers persisting well into 2022 until close to the end of the period of analysis for the data set of this research.

Hong Kong had large scale participation even long after the 2019 protests, but dying down in 2020. The longevity of Hong Kongers' use of the hashtag overall was very likely stunted by the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, originally passed 30 June 2020, which has seen arrests for speaking out against the state, including online, with active enforcement beginning almost immediately after the law went into effect (Fung, 2022). Ultimately fewer spikes in the aftermath of the national security law related to major shifts in leadership or policy appeared than could be observed in other countries. For example, after the new Chief Executive, John Lee Ka-chiu took over for Carrie Lam, very little activity was observed despite the extremely low popularity of both and clear outrage over the process (Lo, 2024). The lack of universal suffrage in the selection process, and relatively low level of support for the Chief Executive on foreign-controlled social media such as Instagram and Facebook, suggest that while Hong Kongers may have been displeased by the process, that their dropoff in participation was due to fear of state retribution. The new Chief Executive's largest following remains instead on Weibo, a PRC-based social media company, and there have been accusations that the ruling communist party in China, who oversees the nomination and election process ensuring his win, instead boosted the public profile of this pro-China Hong Kong politician (Wong, 2022).

Finally, Thailand, the original source of the movement and its solidaristic transnational hashtag sharing demonstrate that Thai support

for Taiwan would not go unreciprocated. However, this support would long outlast the protests which died down in 2021 with Thai participation, like Indian, continuing strongly until late in 2022 near the end of the period of analysis and the data set for this research.

Even Myanmar has maintained high participation, although with decreasing responses over time. The 2022 drop offs in participation in Myanmar were possibly due to internet crackdowns, likely reflecting the junta government choking off access to Facebook, which in Myanmar is almost synonymous with internet access, to stymie protest mobilization (Whitten-Woodring, 2022). The Myanmar junta apparatus has also made accessing the internet through a virtual private network (VPN) punishable by up to three years in prison (The Irrawaddy, 2022), further decreasing the likelihood that citizens would take the risk to interact with Milk Tea Alliance posts.

Countries outside the region of Eastern and Southern Asia have overall seen more muted coverage on social media than within the region. Still, there is a notable phenomenon of high profile outside interactions, particularly in countries with democratic governments, many of which have received significant engagement. These engagements were more often tied to large groups that produce content through "internationally-facing news outlets (Blenkitni & Forehand, 2022)," some directed at the nations of the Milk Tea Alliance, for example BBC Thai or Voice of America. Outside of Asia, North America holds the title for the next highest level of interactions, with the US leading the total count followed by Canada. Still, the combined total of the two G7 states is still lower than Singapore alone, demonstrating the importance of regional dynamics. Australia and the UK follow, both leading Europe, with Germany, France, Norway, and Switzerland following behind. It should be considered that a small degree of this may also simply be linked to

account relocation from core Milk Tea Alliance countries in which state opposition has been repressed.

While extraregional support is relatively small compared to major participant states, it remains symbolically significant in demonstrating international solidarism. It is evidence that both the movement and usage of its hashtags have gained attention and support in the popular consciousness of many democratic nations in the international community. Outside of Asia, this international support also comes almost entirely from English speaking countries. While this may be a relic of the colonial history of both Myanmar and Hong Kong remaining connected to the UK, this phenomena remains notable because many of the posts that contained text were in languages other than English, suggesting deeper cultural or diasporic links. This may speak to the cross-cutting power of the use of memes inside of the Milk Tea Alliance, as discussed in Schaffar and Praphakorn in 2020.

One final notable feature is the cross-national discourse format of sharing images. Within Asia there exists a plethora of different languages, and within the Milk Tea Alliance, there are numerous examples including Thai, Cantonese, Burmese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, and countless others. The multilingual nature of the movement thus necessitates the use of a lingua franca. Users may have chosen to default to English, but an alternative choice may have been the formation of language-free graphics in the form of memes, whose meaning can often be inferred without words through the formation of common understandings. Memes certainly seem to be a key component that assisted international understanding, though new technologies such as translation functions impeded in social media may have also played a role. However, pictures help to evoke a shared understanding as they transcend language and are often derived

from content that is enjoyed around the world. They also employ commonly understood ideas that are not required to be put into words to be understood. The increased relevance of this new tool harkens back to the common symbol building that was created from this movement, and suggests deeper value sharing.

This form of shared-value solidarity seems to have not been built upon a desire to see only one's own country thrive, but instead to build a regional, and perhaps universalist movement for democracy. Nations that seem to have little to gain from the promotion of content, news or activism of others in alliance commonly acted in apparent support of others within the group. Activists in polities such as Taiwan or Hong Kong gain little substantively if local despots are overthrown in distant regional powers, such as Myanmar, other than the normative shifts that take place. However, we can routinely see that people around the world supported them in their struggle, especially those in countries within the Milk Tea Alliance.

Conclusion

The trends examined in the social movement called the Milk Tea Alliance should indicate two primary findings. The first is the sheer geographic spread of the movement outside of its initial region indicating value-based participation outside of regional and local concerns. The second is that the temporal participation through sharing and use of these hashtags unrelated to domestic events both have taken place in a pattern that can only be described as nonreciprocal, and transnational. The patterns of participation of populations in the majority of the participant polities that themselves had grievances, including Thailand, Taiwan, India, and Hong Kong, are strongly suggestive of nonreciprocal behavior, as their spikes in activity occurred irrespective of domestic turmoil, or any potential short-term interest in

signal amplification. Taiwanese netizens, although fearful of the encroachment of the PRC, but whose people are not directly subject to authoritarianism, was one of the largest participants, with even temporal spread in engagement unrelated to domestic concerns. Netizens in India and Thailand both actively participated long after their domestic political conflicts cooled down. Netizens in Singapore and Malaysia, states with flawed democratic institutions but without active political conflicts, who don't stand to directly gain from democratic consolidation in Thailand or regime change in Myanmar, were still prolific in their participation. Lastly, the US, Canada, and Australia, democracies far removed from the region, were the source of some of the posts with the largest number of interactions, further illustrating the importance of the spread outside of the region. The only exception was Myanmar's participation following their own coup, which may be indicative of instrumental bandwagoning, calling into question the degree of nonreciprocal solidaristic support in that polity. However, the degree of long-term political, social, and cultural isolation in Myanmar over decades of sanctions regimes may explain initial hesitance to participate pre-coup. For that country, a case-study is recommended to understand the relationship between Milk Tea Alliance participation and mobilization against the junta. The preponderance of the data still demonstrates that even citizens in polities with little stake in the outcome of faraway neighbors still actively engaged with the movement and its hashtag, and in nearby states this participation occurred even temporally distant from mobilization following domestic events.

One large question largely unaddressed by the current research regards the content and intent of the corpus of participation in the Milk Tea Alliance. This research remains challenging as the sheer number of languages and volume of posts make this a formidable task to parse, especially when including the full range of participant states is considered. Such an analysis could further refine the ideological congruence and extent of value sharing between participants in different states. It also has the potential to attempt to numerically quantify the proportion of participation in each respective state dedicated to domestic versus international issues in order to further provide evidence for the degree of solidaristic transnational value sharing and nonreciprocal behavior. Gradual advances in machine learning based natural language processing will only improve the prospects for this critical analysis.

The broader question still remains as to whether such forms of digital mobilization in police states where citizens are unable to exercise physical protest are sufficient to pressure states to liberalize (Kim & Kroeger, 2019). Follow up research could measure the specific factors influencing the efficacy of such transnational advocacy movements relying on digital mobilization. Lastly, it is critical to also understand the dropoff of movement strength over time, especially for movements whose networks are primarily online and based on solidaristic value sharing and not on diasporic or culturally, ethically, or politically connected communities abroad. This is particularly true for cases when domestic opposition is suppressed and there is a reliance on foreign solidaristic support to echo and amplify grievances and calls for action.

Notwithstanding the inevitable need for refinement and continued advances for theory testing, this research provides abundant evidence with multiple state cases that such digital movements can be representative of a high degree of non-instrumentalized solidarity between netizens of different states. This occurred without the incentive for reciprocity as they shared resources and applied international normative pressure against these regimes with their collective willpower. As such there is optimism that such a movement,

when internationalized, can extend not only the reach and public attention, but also the effective lifespan of a social movement, so that even when it has been purged from within the borders of a country, the idea can persist.

Appendix

Interactive Data Figures:

Figure 1: https://freechinapost.com/data/Figure1.html

Figure 2: https://freechinapost.com/data/Figure2.html

References

Alperstein, N. (2022). Greenwashing as grassroots or no roots social movement: A multi-platform approach to social media monitoring of hashtag activism. *The Journal of Social Media in Society, 11*(2), Article 2.

Blenkitni, A. (2023). The demographic ceiling of changes driven by the Umbrella Movement. https://doi.org/10.1163/27730611-bja10019

Blenkitni, A., & Forehand, J. A. (2022). Vaccine discourse as elucidating global alignment. In *Southeast Asia under stress: COVID-19, geopolitics, and domestic challenges* (pp. 68–106). Wenzao Ursuline University Press.

Bob, C. (2018). Social movements and transnational context. In *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 115–130). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch6

Buchholz, K. B. (2022, August 5). Chart: Chinese air incursions into Taiwanese buffer zone spike | Statista. https://www.statista.com/chart/24620/chinese-military-aircraft-entering-taiwans-adiz/

Chan, D. S. W. (2023). Political resistance in the marketplace: Consumer activism in the Milk Tea Alliance. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 0*(0), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2023.2236414

China-Taiwan tensions erupt over diplomats' fight in Fiji. (2020, October 19). *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54605976

China-Thailand coronavirus social media war escalates. (2020, April 14). *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/14/china-thailand-coronavirus-social-media-war-escalates

Darius, P., & Urquhart, M. (2021). Disinformed social movements: A large-scale mapping of conspiracy narratives as online harms during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Online Social Networks and Media, 26*, 100174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.osnem.2021.100174

De, S., & Thakur, P. B. (2016). Social media and social movement: Contemporary online activism in Asia. *Media Watch, 7*(2). https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2016/v7i2/98745

Dedman, A. K., & Lai, A. (2021). Digitally dismantling Asian authoritarianism: Activist reflections from the #MilkTeaAlliance. *Contention, 9*(1), 97–132. https://doi.org/10.3167/cont.2021.090105

Fawcett, L. (2016). *International relations of the Middle East*. Oxford University Press.

Frischlich, L. (2022). "Resistance!": Collective action cues in conspiracy theory-endorsing Facebook groups. *Media and Communication, 10*(2), 130–143. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i2.5182

Fung, A. (2021, August 21). 4 arrested under new Hong Kong security law for online posts. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/technology-arrests-hong-kong-laws-5d193a73674780b3851ee02e6e3c0a4e

Huang, R. L., & Svetanant, C. (2022). Challenging digital authoritarianism: Milk Tea Alliance and transnational solidarity. In *Activism and authoritarian governance in Asia*. Routledge.

Hyde, S. D. (2020). Democracy's backsliding in the international environment. *Science, 369*(6508), 1192–1196. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb2434

Junta Watch: Plans for Facebook substitute unveiled; military admits coup, and more. (2022, August 20). *The Irrawaddy*. https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/junta-watch/junta-watch-plans-for-facebook-substitute-unveiled-military-admits-coup-and-more.html

Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Cornell University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh13f

Kim, N. K., & Kroeger, A. M. (2019). Conquering and coercing: Nonviolent anti-regime protests and the pathways to democracy. *Journal of Peace Research, 56*(5), 650–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319830267

Kim, S., & Lee, A. (2021). Black Lives Matter and its counter-movements on Facebook (SSRN Scholarly Paper 3980259). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3980259

Lafi, N. (2017). The 'Arab Spring' in global perspective: Social movements, changing contexts and political transitions in the Arab world (2010–2014). In S. Berger & H. Nehring (Eds.), *The history of social movements in global perspective: A survey* (pp. 677–702). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-30427-8_23

Lo, A. (2020, June 12). Opinion, with unpopularity comes great power. *South China Morning Post*. https://archive.is/dPFMs

Nigam, S. (2014). Violence, protest and change: A socio-legal analysis of extraordinary mobilization after the 2012 Delhi gang rape case (SSRN Scholarly Paper 2484641). *Social Science Research Network*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2484641

Phalapong, P. (2022). Milk Tea Alliance: Constructing transnational identity by consuming milk tea in the Asian context. *26*, 1–14.

Pilny, A., & Shumate, M. (2012). Hyperlinks as extensions of offline instrumental collective action. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(2), 260–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.606328

Ponglamjiak, S. A. (2021). Digital solidarity movement of non-state actors against authoritarianism: Milk Tea Alliance of Hong Kong and Thailand. *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues, 24*, 1.

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2023). *Rights refused: Grassroots activism and state violence in Myanmar*. Stanford University Press.

Radue, M. (2012). The internet's role in the Bersih movement in Malaysia – A case study. *The International Review of Information Ethics, 18*, 60–70. https://doi.org/10.29173/irie304

Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2019). Social brokers and Leftist–Sadrist cooperation in Iraq's reform protest movement: Beyond instrumental action. *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 51*(2), 257–280. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000047

Roth, E. (2022, January 26). Facebook's plan to offer free internet in developing countries ended up costing users. *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2022/1/25/22900924/facebooks-free-internet-less-developed-costing-users-wsj

Sadiki, L. (2016). The Arab Spring: The "people" in international relations (Edition 4, pp. 325–355). Oxford University Press.

Schaffar, W., & Praphakorn, W. (2021). The #MilkTeaAlliance: A new transnational pro-democracy movement against Chinese-centered globalization? *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 14*(1), 5–36. https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0052

Schmitz, H. P., Dedmon, J. M., Bruno-van Vijfeijken, T., & Mahoney, J. (2020). Democratizing advocacy?: How digital tools shape international non-governmental activism. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 17*(2), 174–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2019.1710643

Smith, J. (2013). Transnational social movements. In *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm454

Sombatpoonsiri, J. (2021). *From repression to revolt: Thailand's 2020 protests and the regional implications*. GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-71730-3

Szu-chien, H. (2017). The China factor and Taiwan's civil society organizations in the Sunflower Movement: The case of the Democratic Front Against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement. In *Taiwan's social movements under Ma Ying-jeou*. Routledge.

Wang, A. H.-E., & Rauchfleisch, A. (2022). Understanding the #MilkTeaAlliance movement.

Whitten-Woodring, J., Kleinberg, M. S., Thawnghmung, A., & Thitsar, M. T. (2020). Poison if you don't know how to use it: Facebook, democracy, and human rights in Myanmar. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 407–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220919666

Wong, N. (2022, August 17). Hong Kong leader John Lee makes a splash on China's Weibo – but where are the critics and is it all just one big echo chamber? *The Star*. https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2022/08/17/hong-kong-leader-john-lee-makes-a-splash-on-chinas-weibo---but-where-are-the-critics-and-is-it-all-just-one-big-echo-chamber