Twitter as a leadership actor — A communication as constitutive of organizing perspective on a ‘leaderless’ social movement

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Abstract
We applied a communication as constitutive of organizing (CCO) perspective in a case study to examine Twitter’s influence on the leadership dynamics in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests. We argue that Twitter is a powerful nonhuman leadership actor by demonstrating how it coordinates a plenum of co-participating agencies to construct meaningful narratives. In addition, we show that while many social movements call themselves leaderless, because of Twitter’s co-participation, they are not leadership-less. Using digital methods, we first harvested movement-relevant tweets based on hashtags and retweet counts from a key event of the protests, and then analysed the video content in the three most-retweeted tweets. Our analysis shows that Twitter’s various mechanisms dictate how online conversations unfold, and that Twitter therefore influences how “authoritative text” is established. Our study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we contribute to critical leadership studies by showing that Twitter is a leadership actor that enacts sociomaterial leadership, which further challenges the dominant human-centric and masculine views of leadership. In doing so, we reveal that the persistent leaderless movement narrative is a fantasy. Second, by illustrating how Twitter’s authorship mechanisms generate authority and polarity, we contribute to a stream of CCO studies showing that platforms influence power dynamics. Third, by attending to multivocality and dissensus, where a myriad of voices could speak up against the established and perceived injustice, we assert that Twitter as a leadership actor dictates specific modes of communication with performative effects.

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Introduction

“Leaderless” is a label that the press has given to many recent social movements, with activists sometimes proudly adopting this term themselves. This label—and the idea behind it—gained traction with the explosion of the Arab Springs in 2011, and from there spread to other movements that also labelled themselves as leaderless, including France’s Yellow Vests in 2018 and social movements in Algeria, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, and Hong Kong in 2019 (Bohlen, 2020; Graeber, 2018; Serhan, 2019; Western, 2014). The recent rise in leaderless movements coincides with the simultaneous upsurge in activists’ use of social media and platform technologies to mobilize and organize. These social movements are shared collective identities, networks of participatory interactions between a plurality of actors engaging in political or cultural conflicts, whose communicative practices—by necessity—are carried out both online and on the streets (Diani, 1992; Gerbaudo, 2015).

Scholars have questioned this notion, arguing that it hinders movements’ effectiveness because by disavowing power relations, movements make it possible for stealth leadership to arise (Sutherland et al., 2014; Western, 2014). To explore the notion of leaderlessness, we draw on critical leadership research that departs from the mainstream understanding of leadership, which sees it as the embodiment of authority within institutional and organizational settings. Instead, we assert that precarious forms of social collectives such as social movements may be leaderless, but they are not leadership-less (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2014). We investigated movement leadership dynamics in the platform environment of contentious politics and argue that leadership is not limited to individual leaders, but is instead a relational process with “far-reaching influence” on people’s “values, ideals, aspirations, emotions and identities” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: p. 384). We also argue that leadership is a necessary process for questioning authority in problematic power relations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Barthold et al., 2020; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). This broader conception of leadership, combined with the technological developments in communicative practices, demand scholarly attention so we can understand how power dynamics unfold in the digitally networked cultural, political, and economic landscape.

How technologies are understood has been and continues to be debated across management studies, however, sociomateriality has expanded the notion of agency (the capacity to act) by recognizing that both human and nonhuman actors have agency (Orlikowski, 2007). Yet, the communication as constitutive of organizations (CCO) perspective has been increasingly applied because it considers how the symbolic and material intersect based on the premise that “communication generates, not merely expresses, key organizational realities” (Ashcraft et al., 2009: p. 2). The CCO perspective requires that we attend to “what links or relates beings to each other” and account for their “materiality and relationality” (Cooren, 2020: p. 2), and this perspective corresponds to our view of leadership as sociomaterial phenomena (Clifton et al., 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Ropo et al., 2013) that are collectively and communicatively constituted (Tourish, 2014). Adopting the CCO view thus allows us to consider how Twitter, as one specific platform technology, takes part in a complex array of agencies in the practice of leadership.

Recognizing the agential character of technologies and their materialization (Cooren, 2020) allows us to build on and extend Fairhurst’s (2009) notion of “leadership actors”, which includes
formal or informal leaders, followers, or other stakeholders that can exercise power to manage meaning and define reality (Fairhurst, 2009). Leaderless social movements are thus an appropriate setting to expand critical leadership theories because these theories acknowledge that power is not only exercised by leaders, but “results from, and is exercised through, the collective performance of leadership” (Sutherland et al., 2014: p. 6). A sociomaterial study of a leaderless movement that positions Twitter as a nonhuman leadership actor also responds to Crevani’s (2018) call for leadership research to focus on the material character in leadership work.

The empirical setting of our study was a key communicative event during the 2019 Hong Kong (HK) protests—also known as the Anti Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement—and led to our research question: “How does a specific platform technology co-participate in communication to constitute leadership in social movements?” We used digital methods and found that the digital inscriptions of individually authored posts on Twitter, known as tweets, are representations of Twitter’s role in the online protest event space (Rogers, 2019; Venturini et al., 2018). We assembled our tweet collection from movement event-specific hashtags and retweets, and then generated thick descriptions of leadership dynamics by qualitatively analyzing the content of the three most-retweeted tweets. Since each of the tweets contained video content, we conducted a visual discourse analysis (Rose, 2016), which allowed us to uncover Twitter’s meaning-making role in movement leadership. By identifying how Twitter structures communicative interactions and the relationality of material agencies, we show that Twitter communicatively constitutes leadership as a nonhuman leadership actor, and our analysis of authorship effects reveals that Twitter co-participates in leadership by shaping what materialized as talk and text.

Our first contribution is to critical leadership studies by showing that Twitter is a leadership actor that enacts sociomaterial leadership, which further challenges the dominant human-centric and masculine view of leadership. Uncovering Twitter’s leadership role provides evidence to counter the persistent fantasy of the leaderless movement narrative. Our second contribution is to studies on platform technology power dynamics, by illustrating how Twitter’s authorship mechanisms generate authority and polarity. Finally, we contribute to democratic-leadership literature by underscoring the performativity of platform technology. While people can voice their concerns in resistance of established authority through multivocality and dissensus using Twitter, our analysis shows the ways which Twitter dictates the authorship of text serves to maintain inequalities and therefore, demands scholarly and legislative attention.

**Theory narrative**

*The leaderless discourse and the proliferation of platform technologies*

Networked phenomena drive connective and cloud protesting actions (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2015), and while many studies have investigated activists’ use of platform technologies (Van Dijck et al., 2018), fewer have investigated the link between the growth of these technologies and the (perhaps not-so) coincidental rise of leaderless social movements. Considering the convergence of technology and movement actors’ capabilities, Tufekci (2014) recalls how those who resembled formalized leaders were “pushed out of the circle of legitimacy” from the Arab uprisings to more recent Occupy movements, due to their reluctance to engage in institutional politics (p. 207). Young Occupy activists were so persistently anti-leader that they refused to let the late US veteran civil-rights leader and Congressman John Lewis address the crowd simply because he was a political figure (Tufekci, 2014).
Gerbaudo (2015) argues that activists’ leaderless self-conception is a mirage because it ignores how social-media activists influence and shape the actions of movement participants. Activists may “refuse the label of leader, but what they do in terms of communication and organization, especially on social media, amounts to a form of leadership, as a relatively centralized influence on the unfolding of collective action” (Gerbaudo, 2015: p. 135). He focuses empirically on activists’ cultural practices and contends that activism on social media is a form of “soft” leadership, or choreography, with activists “involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (Gerbaudo, 2015: p. 5).

Western (2014) sees the persistent leaderless narrative in many social movements, and draws on Freeman’s (1972) work on power relations in The Tyranny of Structurelessness. In this work he asserts that a movement’s rejection of leadership is harmful because the “leadership and power relations don’t just disappear to create pure social harmony, they simply get driven underground and become enacted in hidden ways by ‘insidious elites’” (Freeman, 1972: p. 679). Yet as Western (2014) notes, the joy movement followers take from being identified as leaderless activists are affective attachments that are hard to displace, which makes it hard for activists to recognize the leadership dynamics that they likely engage in. An essential component of the persistent leaderless narrative is platform technologies, which help mask leadership dynamics, yet platform and their functionalities powerfully determine how narratives—necessary for movements to mobilize and organize—are represented.

From leaders to leadership actors

The understanding of leadership has shifted dramatically over the years, away from individual conceptions of leadership toward collective and pluralistic ones. An early but commonly accepted and persistent notion is that leaders are “managers of meaning” (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), a notion which prompted many mainstream leadership theories to position leadership styles as learnable individual traits and behaviors (i.e. Northouse, 2013; Podsakoff et al., 1996). Recent critical leadership scholarship has advocated a shift, from romanticized notions of the heroic leader to more-contemporary visions in which leaders support and enable individuals’ autonomy and self-guidance (Collinson et al., 2018; Eslen-Ziya and Erhart, 2015; Fryer, 2012; Raelin, 2016b; Salovaara and Bathurst, 2017). A subsidiary stream of research has expanded the focus to explore the relationship between leaders and followers (Hogg, 2001; Malakyan, 2014) and has theorized leadership as relational processes (Brower et al., 2000; Crevani, 2018; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). These relational processes take hold when more than one individual—and sometimes when all organizational members—participate in leading an organizational unit, which scholars have alternatively labelled as shared, collaborative, or distributed leadership (Denis et al., 2012; Edwards, 2011; Raelin, 2016a).

Another step away from leadership as the individual hero came when Fairhurst (2009) introduced the term “leadership actor” to describe “any individual who exercises power by managing meaning, defining reality and providing a basis for organizational action” (Fairhurst, 2009: p. 6, italic original). This expanded definition recognizes the importance of formal or informal leaders, followers, or other stakeholders, not only as “transformative agents,” but also as “receptors of meaning” who, although less-active, nonetheless are involved in processes of meaning-making (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). This expanded conception makes room for a more-subtle and more-dynamic understanding of power, one that is “embedded in social interactions, discourse and the meaning-making processes” (Sutherland et al., 2014: p. 14). The notion of leadership actors further decenters leadership from the dyadic leadership construct in which leaders exercise “power over” followers, to
acknowledge the multiplicity of actors engaged in leadership (Sutherland et al., 2014). In other words, leadership actors collectively influence the masses with the masses and are not embodied in the (typically) masculine figures, but instead embodied in everybody engaged in practices of leadership.

The ontological shift from entitativity to relationality has led to critical leadership studies emphasizing the need for research to capture “situated interrelations and intersecting practices of leaders and followers and managers and workers” (Collinson, 2017: p. 273). Simultaneously, a relational conception of leadership-as-practice shifts empirical attention, to cultural artifacts as well as to the practitioners involved in bringing about dynamic social interactions (Raelin, 2016b). Next, we explore how materiality can expand the notion of a leadership actor further, from everybody to everything.

**Communicative constitution of sociomaterial leadership**

The Montreal School, a branch of CCO, defines communication as the “ongoing, situated, and embodied process whereby human and non-human agencies interpenetrate ideation and materiality toward meanings that are tangible and axial to organizational existence and organizing phenomena” (Ashcraft et al., 2009: p. 34). In other words, communication is a process in which both sociality and materiality take part to create meaning. In this meaning-making process, agency—the ability to make a difference—emerges relationally in hybrid form, from humans and non-humans (Cooren, 2006). Researchers who apply a Montreal School view attend to their relationships and materializations through communication (Cooren, 2020). Recognizing the plenum (“full” in Latin) of agencies involved in communication (Cooren, 2006) acknowledges “agencies of various sorts—textual, mechanical, architectural, natural, and human” (Ashcraft et al., 2009: p. 20). As Latour (1994) made clear, “You are different with a gun in hand” (p. 33), since the human and the gun “exchange properties”. This hybrid relationship allows humans to appropriate what nonhumans do” (Cooren, 2004: p. 377, italic original). Humans still have agency in these relationships, but this understanding of communication shifts the emphasis to materialization in communicative practices (Cooren, 2020).

In our study, we extend Tourish (2014) conception of leadership as communicatively constituted and adopt the Montreal School’s definition of communication, which allows us to see that Twitter participated as a nonhuman leadership actor in the 2019 HK protests. Our inquiry focuses on how Twitter exerts agency to shape how conversations take place and become socially validated, which allowed it to structure how a plenum of agencies came together to generate meaning and direction in the protests. An important assumption of this claim is that text needs social validation to gain authority (Taylor, 2011). We view tweets as part of ongoing conversations, yet a more crucial consideration is when conversations act as texts and inherit the “textual agency” that stabilizes organizational activities (Cooren, 2004). Conversation is a “situated message exchange” or “coordinated activity” within or across communities of practice, while text “is the ‘substance’ upon and through which conversations are formed; they ‘speak’ for the organization by shaping the conversations that appropriate them” (Cooren et al., 2011: p. 1155). Taken together, conversations and text are the materialization of the co-orientation processes, in which people draw upon a multiplicity of agents and figures when communicating with one another and engaging in activity (Cooren, 2010).

Several leadership studies have applied the Montreal School lens to study nonhuman agency (see Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). Using CCO methods to analyze an online strategy meeting, for example, Clifton et al. (2021) contend that technologies also take a leadership role when their hybrid presence becomes relevant in interactions. Focusing on the decision to use software, the authors find
that the technology speak for itself “through the display of their performances” by playing a key role in “confirming” and “convincing” human decisions on software implementation (p. 272–4). Elaborating on actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2007) influences on Montreal School’s theorizing, Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) asserted that in political figures’ performance of leadership, meanings are carried through the situated network of both human and non-human actor, to produce the effect of presence which allows agents to “act from a distance” (p.475). In the Montreal School’s performative view on language, “textual agency” (Cooren, 2004) is recognized to extending the analysis of organizational discourse beyond face-to-face interactions to oral, written, or iconic texts. When texts “become more autonomous (such as policies, contracts, forms), [they] reaffirm the identity and existence of the organization” (Cooren, 2004: p. 380). This understanding of agency as carried through discursive objects, allow for the leadership performances of authority (or their acceptance) from a distance (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009). In this manner, the 2019 HK activists’ production of texts on platforms reaffirmed both their own identity and established the movement’s actorhood (Poon, 2022). However, Twitter’s role in shaping the production and distribution of text through time and space in specific ways demands further attention.

A communicative-constitution view of leadership makes it possible to see conversation and text as constitutive of leadership work by emphasizing the process of authorship and its relation to authority. Crevani (2018) introduced the notion of “leadership work”—the organizing processes that provide or create direction—and argued that these processes should be the “object” of study. Rather than what individual leaders do, she claimed, we should focus on the “language and conversations as central in such processes” (p. 90). For us, these processes are relevant because Twitter, as a non-human actor, influences the authoring process on the platform in ways that challenge the notion of single authorship and attribution (Albu and Etter, 2016). For example, Albu and Etter (2016) investigated communicative affordances on Twitter, along with how hashtags are used; more specifically, how new tweets that are linked to previously authored tweets give fluid meaning to a hashtag. Any subsequent author can either maintain or alter a tweet’s meaning depending on how they engage with it (Albu and Etter, 2016; Allen, 2000). Dawson and Bencherki (2021) conducted a case study on unofficial National Park Service Twitter accounts when the Trump administration had censored various science-related agencies. The authors focused on membership and authorship on the platform, specifically the dis/attribution of text and non-text (meta-information, hashtags, and images) to demonstrate how “rogue” members ambiguously took part in, as well as resisted, organizational authority. The hashtag function is important for social movements because as meta-text, they label and link digital content across social-media platforms, thus allowing activists to find and connect online conversations and add to and create movement narrative through shared authorship (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021).

**Methods**

We chose to conduct our research on Twitter because researchers are permitted to harvest tweets that by default are public, whereas on other platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, users assume that only those in their network or group can see their messages. The 2019 HK protesters communicated and coordinated crucial backstage actions using the platforms LIHKG (a Reddit-like) forum and Telegram (a chat apps that encrypts messages and has group and channel features) (Poon, 2022 [forthcoming]; Ting, 2020) yet between 2018 and 2019, Twitter’s market share increased by 200% in HK (Thomala, 2021), indicating the gaining influence of Twitter during the protests.

The digital methods we used in this case study made it possible for us to repurpose data generated by digital media and to study a collective phenomenon from afar (Venturini et al., 2018). Our
approach was informed by our prior knowledge of the case setting and the current debates concerning the role of platform technologies in management studies. This knowledge and understanding informed each of our research and data-evaluation steps and drove us to apply a creative research approach (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022). Our methods involved initial quantitative steps followed by qualitative analysis. First, we gathered tweets (by hashtag and retweet), then carried out a qualitative networked content analysis (Niederer and Krippendorff, 2019) on the three most-retweeted tweets to more-completely describe the 2019 HK protest leadership dynamics (Rogers, 2019: p. 211). We followed CCO methods to analyze naturally occurring conversations, since the content of the three most-retweeted tweets during a key moment of the protests was part of the movement conversation. As these tweets each contained video, we supplement our conversation analysis with visual analysis methods (Rose, 2016). Next, we describe the HK protests and Twitter mechanisms and detail our methods.

Field and case
The 2019 HK protests began as a response to an extradition bill the HK legislature introduced, which would have allowed the government to consider any country’s extradition requests for criminal suspects. Democracy activists were alarmed because the law would have allowed extradition to mainland China, which has drastically different laws than the semi-autonomous region of HK. The bill was seen as a violation of Beijing’s promise to the HK people that their way of life would remain unchanged for 50 years following the end of British colonial rule in 1997. The tactics the 2019 HK protesters used were based on lessons they learned from the Umbrella movement of 2014, which was a largely peaceful movement sparked by Beijing’s decision to prescreen candidates for HK Chief Executive. The splintering of groups within the Umbrella movement and the arrests that followed led the 2019 protesters to change tactics. They adopted the slogan “Be Water” to signal the movement’s formlessness and flat hierarchy, and prominent activist Joshua Wong made his leaderless claim: “I do not lead the Hong Kong protests, because no one person leads the protests” (Wong, 2019). Platform and other technologies were “the backbone for the mobilization and coordination of a nascent smart mob” (Ting, 2020).

In June 2019, on the weekend of the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident, organizers estimated that over a million-people marched in protest to the extradition bill. As the movement continued through the summer months, it became increasingly volatile, with the police using what activists considered brutal force to suppress their activities. By September, the movement had evolved from one that began in opposition to the extradition bill to one in which activists defended their social and political rights and freedoms.

We chose to harvest Tweets in October 2019 because during this month, which marked the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), tension and angst in HK was especially high. Protestors were defiant. They set up blockades, vandalized pro-Beijing businesses, and threw bricks or Molotov cocktails at the police, while police escalated their response to suppress protestors. By this point, HK police had used over 5000 rounds of teargas and 2000 rubber bullets and were firing live ammunition at protestors (ANITELAB Research Data Archive; Victor, 2019). In November, protestors sieged universities, while the pro-democracy camp won district-level elections. Following these two intense months of protests, with over 3000 arrests, protest actions inevitably dampened, and, along with Covid restrictions. Dissent in HK had effectively ended when the new national security law was imposed in June 2020. The security law officially targets terrorism, subversion, secession, and collusion with foreign forces, yet it has been used to arrest and prosecute protestors. Many activists have since been sentenced to long prison terms while others have fled the city to seek asylum elsewhere (See Table 1 for a timeline of core events).
Twitter as a platform technology

Twitter’s functionalities constitute it as a non-human leadership actor. Each Twitter user has a feed that displays tweets from users whose accounts they follow as well as those that Twitter’s algorithms have determined will have engagement value for that user, based on their profile. For each tweet, users have the option to “like,” “tweet,” “reply,” and “retweet.” Except for those a user has protected, tweets can be searched for by keyword, hashtag, or account names. Every Twitter user can become an author by starting a new conversation (composing and hash-tagging a tweet), and other users can add to the same conversation by using the same hashtag in their own tweets. These functionalities allow users to react to other users’ tweets when they appear on their feed. Our dataset relies on these two functionalities—the retweet and the hashtag (#)—defined in Table 2 with a description of how users typically use them.

Data collection. As we researched, our research question evolved, from questioning whether certain Twitter users are leaders (“To what extent was this movement leaderless?”) to questioning whether Twitter itself is a leadership actor. Our initial query criteria assumed that Twitter users with high influence can be considered as leaders. As we watched the protests develop and as we read and researched critical-leadership literature, we continued to iteratively refine our research and over time became critical of platform technologies’ influence in contentious politics. We then re-conceptualized our study and adopted the Montreal School’s CCO perspective to consider both human and nonhuman actors as leadership actors.

As mentioned above, our dataset comes from Twitter’s hashtag and retweet functions. We collected our tweets by first creating a list of issue-related keywords from news and social media and then searching for those hashtags. We also created a list of the co-hashtags—those that were most often connected to the most-dominant hashtag, #HongKongProtest(s). The lead author, as native of Hong Kong, used common sense, or “synthetic intuition” (Panofsky, 1957: p. 38), to seek out, validate, and authenticate the data as belonging to the communicative episode under study.

We conducted two searches several days apart using Twitter Archiver, an app available on Google Workspace. The app polls Twitter hourly and fetches all matching tweets to a Google Spreadsheet based on specific search criteria. The free version of the app allows a maximum of 10 hashtags per search and each search automatically ends after 100 tweets have been collected. Each of our search requests were completed (i.e. reached 100 tweets) in less than 72 hours. Our first search, on 3 October 2019, collected tweets that had been authored on 24 September 2019 and after, a time window that overlapped with the lead-up to the PRC’s 70th anniversary. We ran our second search on 7 October 2019. Table 3 provides an overview of the Twitter data collection. Our final dataset is
Table 2. Retweet and hashtag characteristics.

| Characteristics          | Retweets                                                                 | Hashtags                                                                 |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Symbol                   | A function that allows users to repost or forward tweets, thus making it possible to quickly share tweets with one's followers (Twitter, n.d.) | A word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#) used on social-media websites and applications, especially Twitter, to name (or “tag”) digital content as belonging to a specific topic |
| Definition               | A form of information diffusion and a means of participating in a diffuse conversation and a way to “validate and engage with others” (Boyd et al., 2010: p. 1). One can retweet one’s own tweets or someone else’s (Twitter, n.d.), i.e. add self-authored text, hashtags, and/or @mentions that may transform the original tweet’s intended meaning | A form of meta-text that makes it possible to cross-reference content. Tweets tagged with specific hashtags are linked to other tweets with the same hashtags. Hashtags link together individual posts on similar topics and make dialogue possible |
| Functionality            | Taking a less-active stance in the online movement space. Other users’ retweets of one’s own tweet, however, are additional iterations of (new) authorship, in which social validation adds to the textual authority of the tweet. This feature supports movement actors’ relational activity, which can help shape collective identity | As stance-taking efforts (Rogers, 2019), they are often the core of online campaigns ranging from marketing to social-movement issues |
| Typically utilized for   |                                                                                                                                     |

Table 3. Twitter data collection.

| Communicative event                                               | Hashtags used for search on 3 Oct 2019 -10 hashtags | Hashtags used for search on 7 Oct 2019 -12 hashtags- |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 2019 | • #eye4HK                                           | • #HongKongProtests                                 |
|                                                                  | • #HongKongProtest                                  | • #Chinazi70years                                   |
|                                                                  | • #PoliceBrutality                                  | • #StandwithHK                                      |
|                                                                  | • #Fight4HongKong                                   | • #StandwithHongKong                                |
|                                                                  | • #Shout4HK                                         | • #actwithHK                                        |
|                                                                  | • #70YearsOfShame                                   | • #5DemandsNot1Less                                 |
|                                                                  | • #FreedomHK                                        | • #antiELAB                                         |
|                                                                  | • #FreeHongKong                                     | • #GoodMourningCCP                                  |
|                                                                  | • #LiberateHongKong                                 | • #NotMyNationalDay                                 |
|                                                                  | • #Chinazi                                          | • #HKPoliceTerrorist                                |
|                                                                  |                                                    | • #HongKongHermit                                   |
|                                                                  |                                                    | • china70yearsofshame                                |

*Threshold of 400 retweets: No threshold exists to determine how many views or retweets constitutes a “viral” tweet. Yet to ensure that the tweets we collected had significant engagement, we evaluated the retweet frequency of ongoing online conversations at the time of the event as a baseline and decided that 400 retweets is significant.
the combined results from both searches, comprising a reliable collection of tweets based on the hashtags that were active during the protests. We chose to analyze the content of the three most-retweeted tweets because we believe the number of retweets indicates that these tweets highly engaged protests participants.

During our research and data analysis, we recognized that we needed to maintain Twitter users’ anonymity. When the vaguely defined national security law was implemented (and strongly criticized by many countries), HK citizens’ rights under the Basic Law were at risk. To prevent account holders from being traced and potentially prosecuted, we excluded account names and the original tweet text accompanying the three videos in our data. Because these tweets contained videos, we analyzed this content in-depth by supplementing CCO methods with visual discourse analysis, an established method we describe next.

**Data analysis**

A central tenet of CCO research is narrative and speech-act theory, and the Montreal School typically uses conversation analysis to study actual interactions (Brummans et al., 2014: p. 38). Several CCO studies have expanded this methodology to focus on materiality, thus challenging the dominant assumption that only human actors have agency in communication and in organizations (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2019). Even so, these studies have rarely analyzed visuals or videos (for an exception, see Clifton and La Broise, 2020). We therefore applied established visual analysis methods, beginning by compositionally interpreting the tweeted videos to draw out the symbolic meaning through a thick description. Panofsky (1957) developed the “iconographical” reading to help understand what works of art mean to contemporary audiences (as opposed to trying to understand their form). Rose (2016) classified this method as “discourse analysis I,” a level of analysis focusing more on “the notion of discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts than it does to the practices entailed by specific discourses” (p. 192). Using these visual analysis methods made it possible for us to examine the content of the videos as well as to reflect on the cultural practices protesters experienced when engaging on Twitter.

We examined how the presence of a plenum of agencies became relevant in interactions to shape the 2019 HK protests narrative, which allowed us to identify how Twitter influenced and gave direction to leadership actions. By investigating the mechanisms of the hashtag and the retweet, we were also able to discover whether communicative practices constitute authority and resistance. We now turn to what we found in the videos.

**Findings**

In Tables 4–6, we describe the three most-retweeted tweets in our dataset: Tweet 1, “Speech Performance,” Tweet 2, “Girl Shaking,” and Tweet 3, “Taxi-in-crowd”.

**Network effect of Twitter functionalities**

The seemingly unedited videos in these tweets contrast with the polished visual narratives in traditional media, and their style seems intended to give viewers a sense of immediacy and authenticity. With no sound or words on the screen, the viewer’s gaze is drawn to the central figure. The emotional scene in the video in Tweet 2, “Girl Shaking,” is only 7 seconds and plays on a loop by default until users scroll down on their Twitter feed. A key element of all these videos is smart
phones, which are a central vehicle for this communication because they make it possible for anyone to film, tweet, and retweet these videos as well as view them.

The account holder for Tweet two had a much smaller number of followers than the 7000 retweets it garnered, a situation that contrasts with Tweets one and three. Tweet two first appeared on the feed of its account holder’s direct followers, who then retweeted it and multiplied its reach far beyond the number of followers. The network effect of Twitter’s hashtag and retweet mechanisms made this expanded reach possible. Each of these three videos reached a countless number of people

| Number of retweets as of 7 October 2019 | 13,106 |
| Hashtag | #FreeHongKong |
| Time length of video | 45 seconds |
| # of followers | 11,500 (roughly) |
| Account name | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx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Table 5. Description of Tweet 2: “Girl Shaking”.

Tweet 2 - “girl shaking”

| Description | This short video centers on a crying girl sitting on the ground in noticeable shock and in fear. An orange helmet worn around her neck confirms that she is a protester, and she is holding her hands near her face. Between the camera and the girl, two human figures whose faces are out of frame dominate. They appear to be armed police in riot gear and body armor. Her vulnerable pose, sitting against a wall on the city streets, stands in opposition to the powerful, faceless police officers in riot gear standing over her in a position of authoritative power. During the video, one of the officers appears to be leaning down and talking to the young girl, and she appears to be looking up at him, shaking or nodding in agreement, while the other armed police officer places his/her hand on his/her weapon handle without drawing it out. |

| Number of retweets as of 7 October 2019 | 12,450 |
| Hashtags | #StandwithHK, #HKPoliceTerrorism |
| Time length of video | 7 seconds |
| # of followers | 280,000 (roughly) |
| Account name | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| Tweet text | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx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because tens of thousands of people decided to retweet them. Even though we intentionally excluded the account profiles of the originating tweet and the authored tweet texts from our data (for anonymity), we can nevertheless trace the communicative practices of tweet authorship. By using hashtags, tweet authors linked the content of these videos to the existing movement conversations. Those who retweeted the original tweets not only supported the movement but also had the option to add to the conversation by using the “quote retweet” function (see Table 2).

**Authored tweets invoke a plenum of agencies**

All three tweets visually represent materialities in various forms. Tweets one and two feature the movement icons of the helmets and Tweet three features the umbrellas. Presenting this plenum of agencies—bodies, weapons, helmet—creates a narrative of resistance to official police power. Tweet 1, “Speech Performance,” is an act of defiance against authority. Criticizing the government in a speech on the streets puts the speaker in a precarious position. This tweet went viral around the time of the PRC’s 70th anniversary. Freedom of speech was indeed protected under the HK Basic Law, and had not yet been challenged by the national security law imposed later. Still, it did not mean that the police on the streets ascertained these rights to activists, who challenged official authority. The content of this speech exemplifies the tension that sparked the protests, as does how this performance was visually represented. The choice to keep the speaker out of view reveals the filmmaker’s caution and perhaps even fear. A core tension in these protests is protesters’ awareness that civil liberties in HK were becoming more and more restricted, and this awareness was likely the catalyst for the performance. Tweet one was the most viral of all three tweets, and what likely garnered more than 13,000 retweets was the textual content of the performance, in addition to the visual representation. The first line, “You call all of us cockroaches,” resonated with activists who had formed a collective identity around this widely used dehumanizing term that pro-government factions had given to protestors. Repeating this derogatory term in this performance acknowledges and confirms protestors’ collective “other” identity.

Another form of textual agency in the video is the speaker’s repetition of the word “massacre,” first in line three and again in line 5. This word implicitly evokes memories of June 4th, 1989, the date marking an event that effectively ended the largest demonstration in the history of Communist China, when the People’s Liberation Army fired on unarmed protestors on Tiananmen Square in the center of Beijing. The term applied to this event has significant implications. Calling it an “incident” implies that no party had any malicious intention, nor took responsibility for what transpired. Referring to it as a “crackdown” implies that strong measures were taken in response to behavior perceived to be undesirable or wrong. In contrast, “massacre,” defined as “the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty” (Merriam-Webster, 2021) implies a wrongful abuse of power. Because this event is such a sensitive topic in mainland China, any mention of it on social media or platform communication is (quickly and quietly) removed.

Tweet one also contains other evocative content invoking two different historical leaders. In referencing Adolf Hitler, the speaker equates the events transpiring in HK to Hitler’s abhorrent actions during the Nazi regime. By contrast, the speaker invokes the civil-rights activist Martin Luther King, famous for advocating non-violent civil disobedience, by citing a famous line from his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in line 7: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!” In referencing both well-known figures, the message was tailored to resonate with the international Twitter community and to appeal for their support.
Leaderless narrative and polarization

Visuals can generate powerful narratives that have emotional power and immediacy, and they can often resonate with audiences more strongly than words can. A video, with its interlinked images, taps into viewers’ previous experiences and knowledge that they can draw on to interactively communicate meaning. The images, tension-laden and moving, provide a foundation for meaning-giving, since individual viewers have to make meaning from them and interpret the images themselves. Tweet 2, “Girl Shaking”, exemplifies this interpretive participation. The video highlights injustice by contrasting the image of the girl with police in riot gear and by illustrating an imbalance of power. However, a different viewer might interpret a different narrative, one that justifies the right of the police to suppress protest actions, with the potential for disturbance and violence ever-present from protestors. These contrasting interpretations may be one reason why this video was so highly retweeted, since sides were drawn during the course of the 2019 HK protests, with protest sympathizers on one side and government and police supporters on the other. Protest sympathizers likely interpreted the video as portraying injustice and provoked anger that the police would arrest a teenage girl so young. Protest opponents might have been happy to see much-needed law and order imposed after months of social and economic disruption.

Tweet 3, “Taxi-in-crowd”, adds further support to the ambiguity of online content, its contribution to the protest narrative, and its fueling of the tension and polarization between the two camps. To protest supporters, the taxi driver represents the pro-China/government camp intentionally running over activists, and elicits a sense of injustice. A neutral interpretation might be that the taxi driver’s action was accidental. Protest opponents might have a third interpretation, believing the taxi driver’s action to be justified. The ambiguity of the video makes all three interpretations plausible, since it is filmed from a distant perspective that makes it impossible to see in detail what was happening on the streets. As described in Table 6, the poor audio quality makes it hard to understand exactly what the speaker is saying. While we can assume that the speaker is also the filmer and had witnessed the event from a birds-eye view, it is unclear whether he said the crowd was “bringing” or “breaking” the taxi before it sped up into the crowd.

Discussion

The pitfalls of constructing a leaderless narrative

In applying a CCO perspective, we have unveiled the sociomaterial leadership dynamics in the 2019 HK protests and shown how Twitter is a leadership actor. A variety of agencies, including “textual, mechanical, architectural, natural, and human,” contributes to the communicative constitution of organization perspective (Ashcraft et al., 2009: p. 20). Recognizing a plenum of hybrid agencies does not minimize human agency (Cooren, 2004); instead, it acknowledges that human actors “appropriate” what nonhuman actors do. In our findings, we see how textual agency was artfully ventriloquized through a human speaker in Tweet 1, and mechanically reinforced in the subtitled video text. Communicatively constituted leadership was also seen in the presentation of the frail young girl in Tweet 2, as was the sudden violence the taxi inflicted on an umbrella-carrying crowd in Tweet 3. All these leadership actions—and the process of these actions—gave the protest direction, and reinforced the notion that “communication is the site of their interpenetration, the process through which agencies collide to co-create realities” (Ashcraft et al., 2009: p.35).

Leaderless-ness is a “fundamental idea dominating contemporary activist discourse” (Gerbaudo, 2015: p.134), yet by showing how tweets contributed to the 2019 HK protest
narrative, we assert that just because a movement is leaderless, it is not leadership-less. The speaker in Tweet one remains out of view, faceless and bodyless, a visual representation that appears to reinforce the leaderless idea. Yet this careful visual orchestration obscures the sociomaterial dynamics behind such a representation. A similar obfuscation was seen in Hawkins’ (2015) study of leadership in the Royal Navy, which emphasized how the hybrid of material and social actors shifted human agents’ perception of possibilities, or affordances, in leadership practices. The researcher documented how leadership was both hybridized and visible based on her interviews with the naval officers. In officers’ accounts of what leadership meant, however, they sidelined the contributions of nonhuman actors and simply reproduced “citations of normative value and assumptions” that reified the notion of a stereotypical masculine leader (Hawkins, 2015 p. 959). Just as the romanticized notion of the heroic leader (Meindl et al., 1985) is widespread and persistent in organizations (Collinson et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2015; Salovaara and Bathurst, 2017), so too has the narrative of leaderless-ness distracted movement participants from recognizing true movement dynamics (Eslen-Ziya and Erhart, 2015; Fotaki and Foroughi, 2021; Western, 2014).

Fantasies have a positive purpose because they allow us to envision an alternative, yet persisting in believing the leaderless fantasy and perpetuating it has two important consequences: not only does it produce generative tensions within movements, it also blinds activists from recognizing the inherent power dynamics as well as the conflicts within social movements (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2021; Western, 2014). Fotaki and Foroughi (2021) said, “leaderlessness is an aspirational idea,” yet accepting this idea as truth makes it impossible for social-movement participants to establish and accept more “leaderfull” organizational practices that can advance a movement’s aims (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2021: pp. 15–16; Western, 2014). As discussed above, leadership is a relational process (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Brower et al., 2000; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Edwards, 2011; Raelin, 2016a; Uhl-Bien, 2006) in which the work done to give organizational direction (Crevani, 2018) is distributed in practice (Raelin, 2016b). When activists discard the fantasy of leaderless-ness and acknowledge that they are in fact “leaderfull” (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2021), they may be better able to utilize the modes of representation that platform technologies provide, and thus more creatively and productively set and achieve movement goals.

A potentially worthwhile fantasy can be found in Mary Parker Follett’s (1924) “power-with” notion, which values co-action over consent as a way to encourage cooperation and improve society (Salovaara and Bathurst, 2017: p. 185). While Salovaara and Bathurst (2017) acknowledged the difficulties in implementing such ideas in contemporary organizations, the authors were captivated by Follett’s democratic ideals, which envisioned people seeking “plusvalants” or “adding value rather than defending positions” (p. 184). If we are going to recognize the web of relations in which the social and material are inextricable, a more fruitful recognition may be fantasizing about the new potential that technologies offer to induce co-participation in the practice of democracy. Activists in democratic movements would be well served by acknowledging how technologies determine the modes in which they can author texts, and the mechanisms which (co-)establish authoritative text on digital platforms.

**Twitter’s authorship mechanisms generate authority and polarity**

Twitter is a “story-telling machine” (Rogers, 2019), a dominant platform that has amassed power and authority. The potential these viral tweets hold for fueling polarizing dynamics demands that we recognize platforms’ authorship mechanisms. By uncovering the “dialectics of control and
resistance” and showing that Twitter (co-)participates as a leadership actor, we make clear how it is true that leadership can be both “a productive source of power and a destructive one” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: p. 24). Although leadership actors cannot always control the outcome, they can take part in the narrative construction of events (Fairhurst, 2009: p. 1608), since enabling and facilitating in leadership are achieved through language and conversations (Crevani, 2018). To recognize the involvement as sociomaterial is the first step in holding technologies and platforms accountable.

Referring back to Tweet 1, “Speech performance”, we recall how historical leaders were evoked. Adding to Clifton et al.’s (2021) analysis of how technology takes part in leadership, we take account of what is upstream of communication (Cooren, 2010). In our analysis, we notice not only the historical leaders as called upon, but additionally, the values and beliefs they embodied are also made relevant in interactions. As a famous advocate of civil rights, King’s voice was made present on the streets by a performer. A performance which was recorded, uploaded and retweeted by 13,106 account within days. It can be seen here that King’s dedication to non-violence is set aside, when the speaker framed the HK situation in such extremity. The evocation of Hitler’s actions is grossly disproportionate from a historical and neutral standpoint, but this frame resonated with platform members at a time of high tension in the city. We urge for activists to see past one famous citation and considering the full repertoire of King’s teachings. To take the full plenum of agencies involved allows us to recognize rhetorical devices used for ill or good, and increase the clarity of how directions are shaped in social movement leadership. With a case setting outside of tradition organizations, our findings extend beyond Clifton et al.’s (2021) work to more evocatively illustrate the strength of the CCO method of analysis.

We show how Twitter’s mechanisms help co-produce text. From a CCO perspective, actors’ co-producing texts represents their intentions, disciplines their actions, and guides the meaning-making processes (Kuhn and Burk, 2014). In this performative view, text can authorize certain activities or people and downgrade or sideline others (Taylor and van Every, 2011). To problematize Twitter’s involvement in movement dynamics as a leadership actor requires considering how it determines what becomes “authoritative text” (Kuhn, 2008). Kuhn’s concept of authoritative text “portrays the relations of authority and criteria of appropriateness that become present in ongoing practice” (Kuhn, 2012: p. 553). In other words, authoritative text establishes a set of discursive practices that determine how subsequent practices ought to be conducted. Acknowledging viral tweets as authoritative text in online activism allows us to investigate how such texts condition a movement’s trajectory. Authoritative text can structurally and directionally orient actions, to broadly articulate what a collective is and is not “in the sense of establishing an identity, a trajectory, and the practices that the collective can pursue to accomplish its future” (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). As Twitter co-produces text, we must acknowledge and scrutinize the ways to which its design, governance, and use are performative.

An important part of this scrutiny is recognizing that Twitter has its own agenda in co-participation. Its mechanisms are designed, constructed, and distributed to engage; whether the effect of its co-participation is polarizing is merely an afterthought. To interrogate how authority is negotiated through authorship (Taylor and van Every, 2000) in the on-going conversations that these tweets generate, we need to expand our focus from the hashtag and the retweet to Twitter’s opaque algorithmic mechanisms. To gain viral traction, a tweet first needs to grab attention and entertain. Twitter’s algorithm is designed to reward tweets that meet certain criteria, and these rewards establish, re-create, and reproduce a norm for the kinds of tweets that are posted and shared. The design, governance, implementation, and use of technologies is performative, since
the specific activities and behaviors that are “authorized” determine the mode of meaning-making. In fact, Twitter is a leadership actor both because of its functionalities and because it is an organizational entity itself. Any values that inform Twitter’s principles are secondary to its monetary goal as a profit-driven company. This profit-driven motive ignores and dismisses a fundamental idea of leadership: that as a productive source of power, leadership actors have an ability (and an obligation) to be relationally and morally responsive.

To choreograph a movement in a productive direction requires acknowledging socio-material leadership and its influence on emotional cohesion. As we see in our data, because tweets that go viral are emotion-laden and portray violence, they not only serve the interests of opposing camps, they also reinforce polarizing views. As important as emotions are in virality of content, we need to recognize that users are not the only actors involved in retweeting the videos that do become viral; Twitter’s algorithm, which both facilitates and distorts the possibilities for activists to engage in collective action, co-participates (Etter and Albu, 2021; Milan, 2015). Twitter’s algorithm powerfully determines—based on user profiles—who outside of the tweet author’s network can see a video. Such profiles are constructed based on individuals’ online activity, including their likes, retweets, and comments, as well as their network, i.e. who they are following and who follows them. Thus, Twitter’s mechanisms combined with normative users’ behavior amplify the emotionally laden shock-value in movement content. Meanwhile, narratives that may be more constructive and appropriate for guiding meaning-making and the process of identity formation that involve plusvalants are less circulated. “We often forget that these platforms are owned and controlled by media and telecoms corporations, their focus is not on participation, empowerment, nor social justice” (Milan, 2013). Twitter has the proprietary power to determine which messages are spread and to whom, and although we do not know how it prioritizes content (Etter and Albu, 2021), recognizing Twitter as a leadership actor rightly puts the focus on its biased aim to maximize engagement. An accepted notion is that Twitter’s support of dialogue—by providing a space to do it—also provides a space for dissent. Yet in light of Crevani’s (2018) notion of leadership work, we might question whether the direction of this support in the organizing processes of movements is productive or destructive.

**Twitter’s role in resistance and dissensus through multivocality**

Tweets that are highly circulated by retweeting gain authority, yet that authority does not necessarily univocally amplify the narrative a movement wants or needs. By selecting and emphasizing certain meanings in redistributing peer-created online content, people and Twitter engage in a process of collective identity construction, demarcating “Us” against “Them” (Melucci, 1996: p. 83) in movement narratives. The narrative that emerges should not be interpreted as being exclusively validated by supporters. This extends Milan’s (2015) argument that collective identity has become more “flexible,” “symbolically inclusive,” and “open to interpretations” (p. 896). Although high counts of movement-related retweets (i.e. those using movement-related hashtags) denotes the active participation of a large number of people in shaping the movement narrative, retweets may also be used to show indifference or to negate the intended meaning of the original or subsequent tweet author(s). Retweets can thus generate multivocality and can potentially transcend the “us versus them” script of polarizing identity dynamics, yet we do not know how Twitter’s algorithm determines which tweets are prioritized on users’ feed, and whether the algorithm blocks certain tweets from ever reaching specific people based on their profile.
Visual representations were key elements in Twitter’s authorship dynamics in the 2019 HK protests. Our findings show that specific elements of materiality from a plenum of agencies also took part in communication to give the protests direction. This provides support for Wilhoit and Kisselburgh’s (2019) finding in a study of the communicative constitution of bike commuters who claim that resistance is relationally produced by a plenum of agencies. These authors posit that materiality plays a role in resistance practices, even when human actors do not acknowledge their own actions as forms of resistance. Dawson and Bencherki (2021) had related findings, namely that Twitter’s communicative practices not only constitute communicative authority, but that similar practices are at work in resistance. Because the tensions inherent in control and resistance are complex, we need a relational understand of agency.

In true democratic movements, activists disrupt authoritarian power to have their own voice heard through contingent acts. Barthold et al. (2020) assert that participative dialogue, which “in itself can be thought of as leadership,” is vital to both collaborative and democratic forms of leadership, but they maintain that these forms of leadership are distinct (p. 6). “Dissensus” is crucial in democratic forms of leadership, meaning that people voicing their concerns need to be recognized as legitimate and allowed to question authority (Barthold et al., 2020). Anyone with internet access and basic technological knowledge can post a tweet, but to be recognized as a legitimate voice on Twitter requires producing social capital in a complex process. Legitimate voices equipped with social capital may reproduce the same—or even increased levels—of inequality and subjectivity that existed in pre-digital modes of governance. Theorizing the networked culture Benkler (2006) claimed that the destabilizing effect from the increase of “autonomy, democracy, justice, and a critical culture” should not be a cause for concern as long as threatening behavior such as “the practices of nonmarket information production, individually free creation, and cooperative peer production” were kept on the fringe (p. 385). Is this pro-market, anti-creative, anti-cooperative sentiment essentially what Twitter helps recreate? Twitter users without a large number of followers have a limited space for engaging with retweets, likes, and comments (with the occasional quote, retweet, or @mention). Without accumulated social capital, these “minor” users can tweet but will not be heard. Recognizing how specific authoritative text takes form and whether there is room for negotiation or dissensus can help maintain and expand healthy democratic practices.

Future research

Our focus in this study was on leadership rather than followership. But just as leaders’ agencies and practices have “romanticizing tendencies,” so too do followers (Collinson et al., 2018: p. 30). Since followership is an important component in Twitter’s network effect, future research could explore the romanticized notion of followership on platform technologies. We also suggest that, since situated communicative practices differ across platforms, future research could explore socio-material leadership dynamics on other platforms or across platforms.

As of this writing (May 2022), the Twitter board of directors has accepted Elon Musk’s offer to buy Twitter, and Musk has articulated via platforms how important free speech is to democracy and suggested to improve Twitter with new features. He stated that trust in the platform can be strengthened by making Twitter’s algorithm open source and by defeating spam bots, requiring, for example, human users to authenticate their identification (Musk, 2022). Such efforts would inevitably be coupled with country-specific policing efforts. In conducting this study, we saw that an online space for dissent relies on allowing users to disguise their identities from the public as well as the authorities. Positively linking free speech with democracy and
Negatively linking censorship with authoritarianism is naively simplistic. The problem goes much deeper. The difficulty of controlling potentially abusive practices in the digital sphere can be traced back to the early 1990s when online communities first formed. The 1998 (US) Digital Millennium Copyright Act sought to impose order and to control online information resources; since then, however, practices and legislatures in both the US and Europe have prioritized the private market and have allowed big tech to dominate the digital sphere. The Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal showcased the extent that a platform can violate agreed upon user data privacy terms, just to get a slap on the wrist with fines, and go on earning quarterly revenues upwards of 20 billion on average per quarter on the same business(-as-usual) model (McNamee, 2020). If power dynamics become centralized in technologies monopolized by big tech firms, we risk moving from post-heroic leadership to neo-heroic leadership. Recently, the European Union has proposed the Digital Market Act, which would make it easy for governments to regulate content (Santariano, 2022). We need more research that investigate situated communicative practices to be able to provide guidance for future legislative decisions and regulations to moderate platform content.

Limitations
While our data allowed us to showcase Twitter’s co-participation in the communicative constitution of leadership, a longitudinal approach with data collected at regular intervals would have given us a more-complete dataset. Comparable samples of tweets from other key points of the 2019 HK protests may also have enriched our dataset. In addition, we exclusively collected tweets with hashtags, specifically those in English and not in Chinese. A keyword(s) search would have collected authored tweets, yet we maintain that hashtag use denotes activists’ stances, and that with this mechanism, users add their own tweets to existing public conversations.

Although we discussed that a retweet does not necessarily indicate that the retweeter shares or supports the intended meaning of a tweet, our analysis did not consider whether and how users differently interpreted and transmitted tweets by retweeting (e.g. by adding comments). We also did not authenticate whether any of the retweets were made by Twitter bots (software that runs automated tasks through Twitter accounts). Because the Twitter algorithm is opaque, we do not know whether collecting data using our own profiles from Europe resulted in a different dataset than had we had collected data from HK. Despite these limitations, we believe our data is robust, supports our findings, and makes a significant contribution.

Conclusion
By employing a CCO view centered on communicative and sociomaterial practices, our case study of a communicative episode in a recent social movement shows the materialization of hybrid agencies at work. Leadership is not only a distributed and dialogically constructed phenomenon (Gronn, 2002) but also a set of multivocal sociomaterial practices. Technologies do not simply provide us with new possibilities; they are also active agents in doing leadership work. Our work adds to the stream of post-heroic leadership studies, and recognizes that leadership as practiced in contemporary social life is inextricably linked with technologies. We operationalized the notion of the leadership actor on Twitter, a platform technology and a public (and likely soon-to-be private) company. Our aim was not to make political assertions nor identify the cause or effects of the 2019 HK protests. Rather, it was to identify the relational
nature of the obscure power dynamics in the communicative constitution of leadership vis-à-vis platform technologies, and to transcend the dominant entitative thinking in management and leadership studies.

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