Online political public relations as a place-based relational practice: A cultural discourse perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces the theoretical and methodological approach of Carbaugh's (2007) cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) to advance the research agenda on political public relations. I discuss how CuDA, as an extension of the ethnography of communication (EoC), provides clues to unexpected success in an election campaigning. Using the 2016 Hong Kong lawmakers' election as an empirical example, the most discussed Facebook posts of an election candidate, and 6800 online comments from the public are studied. I identify the socio-cultural meanings that are used and can be used to engage public-to-public election canvassing. This study shows that the prominent discursive hubs of dwelling and relation organize networked publics to canvass. Responding to the socio-cultural turn of the literature, this study grounds the theorization of political public relations in practice. The evaluation of different approaches to discourse also moves the field forward methodologically.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the limitations of public opinion polls in predicting election outcomes. Examples include the unpredicted support for Donald Trump in the United States presidential election, the unexpected 'Brexit' vote in the United Kingdom, and the surprising victory of independent candidate Eddie Hoi-dick Chu in the Hong Kong Legislative Council election. Although the pre-election polls provide a predictive trend on the election outcomes, the polling can be influenced by reliance on self-reported data, the potential bias of using landline numbers, the lack of appropriate sampling frames, and a spiral silence effect (Kenett, Pfeffermann, & Steinberg, 2018). There is a gap in the existing polling research on public behavioral data that reflects culturally-grounded discourse in an election campaign. In this study, the term "public" refers to social media users who discuss the issues relating to an election candidate's election campaign. "Culturally grounded discourse" refers to naturally occurring discussion among social media users situated in a socio-cultural context.

Against this background, I propose a socio-cultural approach to advance the theory and method of political public relations practices using cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) (Carbaugh, 2007). Theoretically, I consider political public relations as a communication practice (a recurrent and meaningful pattern of message-endowed action) rather than a specific profession. Existing studies have predominantly framed political public relations as an organizational management process, suggesting that reputation maintenance can help to enhance stakeholder engagement (Painter, 2015; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011). However, the socio-cultural and discursive role of political public relations in an election campaign has rarely been addressed (Edwards, 2016; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011). By responding to the socio-cultural turn of the public relations literature, I conceptualize political public relations as the communication practice between an election candidate and the public, as well as between members of the public on social media during an election campaign. This conceptualization is consistent with Edwards (2016), who argues that the role of political public

relations is to both maintain publicity and reputation, and facilitate deliberation in society. This study also responds to the theoretical call from Edwards (2018) and Edwards and Hodges (2011) to take public relations research beyond the notion of purposeful communication by reconsidering the socially interactive nature of public relations practice. Reflecting upon the socio-cultural meanings in situated discursive and symbolic conditions is theoretically and socially important (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; L'Etang, 2005).

Methodologically, CuDA provides a socio-cultural analytical framework in which to make sense of the strategic use of the cultural discourse of dwelling, relation, identity, emotion, and action on social media in an election campaign. Many scholars have suggested that utilizing social media as a communication tool can improve interactivity between a political organization, an election candidate, and voters, and reach populations that are not traditional media consumers (Graham, 2014). The fact that political candidates can now leverage unique, low cost, and live interaction resources to build a communication network between them and the public, or between members of the public, has become the key to winning public support and achieving political goals. Communicating on social media helps election candidates to build beneficial relationships and gain public trust for political purposes (Painter, 2015). It also enables culturally grounded discourse to be seen, addressed, and responded to in a timely and interactive manner. Social media expands research possibilities by providing primary data for studying cultural discourse and refining theories and methods for political public relations research.

In the following section, a case study of the unexpected success of Eddie Hoi-dick Chu as the elected lawmaker in the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LEGCO) election is introduced. Then, CuDA is theoretically discussed with its differentiation from other theoretical approaches to discourse, and its proposed analytical framework of five discursive hubs. This is followed by an outline of the methodology. Subsequently, the meanings of the situated discourse (Chu and the social media users who commented on his election campaign) are analyzed in relation to Hong Kong, where their communication practice was culturally grounded. Then, a descriptive analysis is conducted to identify how they discussed particular practices in their context. Finally, the ways in which the situated public explicitly and implicitly creates socio-cultural meanings are interpreted (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013). Ultimately, the aim of this study is to theorize the prominent discursive hub(s) by understanding the deep cultural meanings that are used and can be used by political candidates.

2. The case study

2.1. Eddie Hoi-dick Chu: the unprecedented "king of votes" in the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LEGCO) election in 2016

Hong Kong is a former British colony, was returned as a special administrative region to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Since its handover, the city has been exercising a promised 50-year "one country, two systems" policy. The leader of Hong Kong, the Chief Executive, is not elected by universal suffrage. The LEGCO election is the highest level of political election in which Hong Kong citizens can cast their votes. It has the power to question the work of the government, and endorse or impeach the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, the Court of Final Appeal, and the Chief Judge of the High Court. Maintaining a balance of power in LEGCO is a daily topic among Hong Kong citizens.

On 4 September, 2016, the sixth LEGCO election attained an historic 58 percent vote rate. This was the first lawmaker election since the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, when localists emerged as a new political force competing with the dominant pro-Beijing and pan-democracy parties. Eddie Hoi-dick Chu won the highest number of votes across all geographical constituencies as an independent candidate. Unlike the previously successful LEGCO candidates, whose votes could be traced to particular demographic characteristics, Chu's unprecedented high number of votes was almost evenly distributed. He gained 18–24% of votes representing various social groups across all stations in his election area of New Territories West – occupants of public housing estates, subsidized housing and private housing, through to rural villages.

Hailed by social media users as the "king of votes," Chu's main political agenda was "rural land justice" and "democratic self-determination". Chu is a former investigative journalist and social activist. He is also an environmentalist affiliated with the Land Justice League, who first made his name in the preservation movement to protect Hong Kong's historic sites. None of the traditional media had predicted the victory of this independent political candidate, who had little lawmaking experience. Chu's unexpected victory in the LEGCO election led to public questioning about polling misfires.

2.2. Reflexivity as a qualitative researcher

Reflexivity is considered a metacommunication process in which one level of discourse is used to discuss another (Carbaugh, 2007). The assumption is that gaining a complete understanding of the communication practice is impossible. Only an interpretation that reflects the grounded perspectives of the observed research subjects can be offered. My own personal background, experiences, political orientation, and plans to stay in Hong Kong might influence the data collection and analysis. However, I am neither a voter in Chu's election area nor a social activist or environmentalist, and I have limited knowledge of local historic preservation and rural landscapes. I have made no personal comments on Chu's or any other LEGCO election candidate's social media page. The aim of this study is to understand what Chu communicated to the public on social media and how online political talk highlighted some aspects of the campaign as more significant than others.

3. Literature review

3.1. A reconceptualization of political public relations in the socio-cultural turn literature

The conceptualization of political public relations in this study is informed by the work of Edwards (2018), Edwards and Hodges (2011) and L'Etang (2005), who regarded public relations as social interaction that is constituted in and constitutive of its practices (Stenberg, 2016). A socio-cultural approach to political public relations practice denotes the "continuities or commonalities among the activities of social groups" and that "the content or pattern embodied in a practice must be transmissible in ways that would preserve its identity across practitioners" (Rouse, 2007, p. 198–199).

3.2. Studies of discourse in political public relations literature

Discourse theory has been introduced in emerging studies on public relations practice (De Brooks & Waymer, 2009; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Motion & Leitch, 2009). As L'Etang (2005) argues, there had been "a discursive turn in the field" (p.522). For instance, Motion and Weaver (2005) introduced the discursive and Foucauldian perspectives to study power relations in political public relations campaigns. Using critical discourse analysis, De Brooks and Waymer (2009) investigated the discursive construction of Crystallex International Corporation to manage legitimacy. Stenberg (2016) discussed the role of discourse in how government agencies in Sweden implemented public relations practices in the context of innovation hype. In most of the existing literature, discourse has been approached from a critical research paradigm in relation to the Foucauldian notion of power. Interpretative analysis on discourses from a socio-cultural perspective has remained limited in the field of public relations.

3.3. Cultural discourse analysis as a theoretical and methodological approach

I propose a cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) approach (Carbaugh, 2007) to make sense of the communication and culture that are mutually constitutive in political public relations practice. CuDA is derived from the tradition of the ethnography of communication (EoC) (Hymes, 1962; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005). In its relation to the theoretical foundation of cultural communication and speech code theory (Philipsen, Coutu, Covarrubias, Gudykunst, 2005), communication is considered to be a culturally distinct, socially contested, and individually adopted place-based action (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013). Communication as a situated and cultural practice of a larger expressive system is reflexive of the implicit and explicit meanings important to the locals in an election campaign. The communication practice and the socio-cultural background work together, providing context for one another between organizations and the public, in alignment with CuDA (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013; Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, Dickinson, 2011).

3.3.1. Existing studies in which cultural discourse analysis was utilized

Cultural discourse analysis is a theoretical and methodological approach in the field of communication that was proposed by Carbaugh (2007). Existing literature adopting CuDA or a cultural approach to communication practices can be categorized into two main areas: environmental communication (Carbaugh and Cerulli, 2013; Milstein et al., 2011) and organization-public communication (Dahlberg, 2001; Witteborn, 2010; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). In the field of environmental communication, Carbaugh and Cerulli (2013) theorized the cultural discourses of dwelling, namely that environmental communication is inseparable from places. After studying engaged environmental actions, the authors highlighted the identity and sense of belonging relating to place-based communication. Milstein et al. (2011) adopted a community-based approach to identify the cultural aspects of the Hispanic sense of relations-in-place.

In the area of organization-public communication, Dahlberg (2001) discussed how online deliberative forums embedded social and cultural differences as a replication of offline discourse. Witteborn (2010) used a CuDA approach to demonstrate that moral and ideological implications are embedded in the concept of global citizenship in transnational communication practices. Witteborn and Sprain (2009) studied the grouping processes in a public meeting of members of a neighborhood with a shared distrust of their Chamber of Commerce from a cultural discourse analysis perspective. They argued that place-making and relating shed light on the grouping processes during the public meeting.

These studies serve as an empirical departure point for this study, because political public relations during an election campaign fundamentally involve place-based and relational communication. Communication practice reflects the socio-cultural imagination of a city that the public considers its long-term residence. In other words, political public relations can be studied as a place-based practice because they represent the geographical and social elements of the area (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001). Place-based political public relations also connect a political candidate to the collective memories and social feelings attached to a place (p.154). Moreover, the link between place, identity, and culture needs to be established in order for the public relations campaign to foster public resonance (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013). Political public relations during an election can thus be regarded as communication about the relationship between an organization and the public, social identities, and spaces, as well as the past, present, and future (Milstein et al., 2011).

Cultural discourse analysis is a social interaction approach in which the emphasis of some meanings over others is theorized as a cultural practice. As political campaigning and election candidates are socio-culturally situated in a specific place (country, city, district, or community), using CuDA as the conceptual framework contributes to understanding the particular identity, action, emotion, relations, and dwelling indicated in the data. Cultural discourse analysis expands the existing research agenda to examine

how a political candidate can address culturally-grounded concerns during an election campaign. In other words, the naturally occurring social interactions among local citizens need to be seen and understood. Instead of viewing an election from the standpoint of elite or media discourse, CuDA provides important clues for effective political public relations. It will enable election candidates to draft policy proposals and campaign strategies that effectively address voters' local concerns and expectations, and thereby gain support in an election.

3.3.2. Differentiation between CuDA and other approaches to discourse

Cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) is often discussed in relation to the ethnography of communication (EoC), as proposed in Hymes (1962) and Blommaert's (2005) critical discourse analysis (CDA), and Shi-xu's (2009) cultural approach to discourse (CAD). Despite the broad similarities of the concern about culture and meanings, there are epistemological and ontological differences in their data collection and analyses. The interpretive paradigm is utilized for EoC (Hymes, 1962) and CuDA (Carbaugh, 2007), both collecting naturally occurring data. EoC's primary concern is to understand the "communicative habits of a community in their totality" (Hymes, 1962: 23). By beginning with the description of culturally significant symbols in native accounts, researchers depict the entry point to the situated socio-cultural system of communication (e.g. Katriel's 1990 study on the Israeli culture of "griping"). Extending EoC, Carbaugh (2007) formulated a theoretical and methodological framework of CuDA to interpret the nested relationships of symbols situated within codes and codes within discourse (Scollo, 2011). CuDA adds to EoC in that the broader culturascape can be identified. This refers to the expression of meaning as a system that is situated in one communicative occasion.

In comparison to EoC and CuDA, which were located in the interpretive paradigm of researchers playing the role of both participant (first person) and observer (third person), Blommaert's (2005) CDA and Shi-xu's (2009) CAD belong to a more explicitly critical paradigm, with the researchers taking up the third person role of critic and deciding on a specific focus on social problems. However, this does not suggest the absence of implicit critical elements of the EoC and CuDA. Carbaugh's (2007) approach to formulating a cultural discourse theoretical framework for cross-cultural comparative analyses was a response to the critical call for intercultural contextual awareness that demonstrated a consciousness of the pitfalls of the cultural bias or universalism of communication. Ultimately, the aim of CDA and CAD is to bring social change, while the aim of CuDA, as an extension of EoC, is to understand the situated discourse.

Against this background, the primary rationale for choosing CuDA over other approaches was that Carbaugh's (2007) CuDA provided a multicultural approach to studying human communication and cultural discourse. Therefore, cultural diversity is embraced by the analytical framework and can be used to understand the generality and particularity across cultures. Fundamentally, it lays solid ground to understand how and why communication is conducted from the perspectives of the naturally occurring data of political talk on social media.

3.3.3. Five discursive hubs of cultural discourse analysis as an analytical framework

To capture situated language and the social interaction process, Carbaugh (2007) proposed five discursive hubs of CuDA to explore how particular modes of socio-cultural life were imbued with meaning in communication practices: self-identifying, acting, expressing emotion, relating to others, and dwelling in the making of a place. When studying the situated actors' communication, *identity* is indicated by the use of pronouns and identification words that signify who an individual thinks he or she is. *Action* can be examined when the actors talk about what they are doing. *Emotional expression* becomes explicit when feelings are discussed, while *relating* can be identified through reference to the social network linking actors to each other. Finally, *dwelling* is the local place-making, which is observed when actors name a place and share stories surrounding that place.

CuDA provides a further theoretical focus relevant to interpreting the implicit community meanings and socio-cultural knowledge embedded in cultural discourse. Carbaugh (2007, p.174) conceptualized "radiants of meaning," which refer to the cultural meanings implicit in the discursive hubs in the communication practice. He proposed that the richer the cultural meaning in the communication, the wider the meaning radiates. CuDA's theoretical, descriptive, and interpretive modes of analysis create the methodological framework for this study.

3.4. Political talk on social media as situated cultural discourse

Political talk on social media is referred to as the online networked communication of political points of view among social media users that resembles face-to-face interaction, synchronous, and close-to-casual political discussion in a potential public sphere. Political talk about an election candidate involves primarily linguistic communication that is situated in social media, involving actors' emotional expression and rational discussions. The fundamental epistemological assumption of this study is that it is produced by active language users who are capable of reflecting local meanings. Analyzing political talk on social media therefore helps to situate linguistic characteristics, given that it is a communication practice that is culturally grounded and commonly shared within the situated community – in this case, of those who engaged in political talk about Chu's election. The political talk among this group of community members also draws attention to its socio-cultural context and to the communication of the group's understanding of the Hong Kong socio-cultural context. Communication in the process of political talk is tied to how one understands the self in relation to other social actors and a specific "place" within the socio-cultural and political context. Analysis of political talk thus reveals who these people are, what they do, how they feel, what they relate to, and how they talk about where they live – the five discursive hubs that Carbaugh (2007) defined.

4. Research objectives and research questions

In this study the grounded perspective on political public relations communication practice is discussed by using the example of Eddie Hoi-dick Chu's election campaign on Facebook during the 2016 Hong Kong LEGCO election period. The main research objective is to examine how culturally grounded discourse on social media explains Chu's unexpected success. Using the Facebook profile and posts as the primary data, Chu's communication and the political talk about Chu on Facebook are analyzed. As political campaigns and election candidates are socio-culturally situated in a specific place (country, city, district, or community) and touch upon the topics of identity, action, emotion, dwelling and relation, a cultural discourse analysis approach is employed for this study (Carbaugh, 2007). By examining Hong Kong's public within their situated socio-cultural context, I shed light on the locally-grounded meanings that were explicit while discussing Chu during the 2016 LEGCO election period. This will indicate what set Chu apart from other political candidates who ran during the same election. His high voting success can be understood as an empirical case of effective political public relations efforts exerting influence in terms of communication and action. I explore:

RQ1. How did Chu communicate with his key public in Hong Kong?

RQ2. How did social media users "talk" about Chu and make sense of their support for him in the Hong Kong LEGCO election of 2016?

RQ3. What are the implications of CuDA for political public relations?

5. Data collection and analytical procedures

I collected the data from Chu's public Facebook page from the first date Chu announced that he was running for election (4 August, 2016) to the actual date of the LEGCO election (4 September, 2016). The corpus of the data collection includes: 1) Chu's Facebook front page, his Facebook name, and the banner photo that served as the first point of political public relations communication with Facebook users; 2) the most popularly read, shared, and commented upon Facebook posts; and 3) all the relevant Facebook comments directed at Chu during the 2016 LEGCO election period (approximately 6800 as of 4 September, 2016). The rationale behind sampling the data on Facebook for this study was that this social media platform had the highest outreach rate – more than 50 percent – in Hong Kong, as of the fourth quarter of 2015 (Statista, 2016). Facebook served as the major social media communication channel for LEGCO election candidates to post information, communicate, and interact as part of their political public relations. The corpus includes traditional Chinese and Cantonese dialect, with some English Facebook comments, reflecting the linguistic characteristics of Hong Kong's bilingualism (Sung, 2014). Both the original text and the English translation (translated by the researcher) are presented for a locally-grounded analysis.

The analysis follows a two-step approach (Carbaugh & Cerculli, 2013). First I discuss the data, along with the discursive hubs that Chu used. Then, I identify one or an interrelated set of prominent discursive hubs that radiate the meanings of being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling. The data was open coded and organized into preliminary categories that repeatedly occurred in Chu's communication with the public and the online political talk about his election (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By following these key terms in their related content, I analyzed them, employing CuDA, to identify the five discursive hubs until the point of "saturation," namely when online comments did not contribute to new patterns of political talk (Charmaz, 2014).

5.1. Attempts to achieve epistemologically relevant outcomes

I attempted to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study by adhering to the principles proposed by Baym (2006), LeCompte and Goetz (1982), and Shenton (2004). Specifically, Shenton (2004) proposes that there are four criteria to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative research projects, namely credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

To ensure *credibility*, the most popular Facebook posts and comments were sampled based on the Facebook statistics for the one-month election campaign period. This choice was based on the fact that the Facebook front page, the first access point of Chu's political public relations communication, together with the widely discussed social media content posted by Chu and his team, were the key political public relations communications that gained the voters' support. To achieve *confirmability*, I focused on studying what Chu and his team emphasized repeatedly on Chu's Facebook page and in his posts to triangulate with the data from the Facebook users, instead of using my own interpretation. I also looked for key terms that Chu shared on Facebook posts and comments to ensure external credibility (Baym, 2006).

To ensure *transferability*, the study was contextualized in Section 2 to enable readers to decide whether the interpretation of the can be applied to other settings. To meet the *dependability* criterion, the application of CuDA was explored as a theoretical and methodological framework in the research field of political public relations and political talk. As a departure point, I aim to provide recommendations for a socio-cultural shift in political public relations research.

6. Analysis

6.1. Placed-based communication with the public through a cultural discourse of dwelling

Prior to analyzing the most popular Facebook posts during Chu's LEGCO election period, I present a screenshot of Chu's Facebook

Fig. 1. Screenshot of Chu's Facebook front page with English semantic translation.

main page (Fig. 1), because it provides a sense of the overall theme of Chu's political public relations campaign.

One of the primary hubs of Chu's campaign communication was dwelling. I found a recurring pattern of explicit emphasis on local places in Hong Kong on his Facebook page during the election. It is important to highlight that Chu's name, as it appears on his Facebook page, starts with a place name (*dwelling*) of a local rural village in Hong Kong, "Pat Heung[1] (八鄉)," which appears before his Chinese name ("朱凱迪"). It is then followed by his English name, a transliteration of the Cantonese dialect of his Chinese name ("Chu Hoi Dick"). The combination of the rural village, located in his election area, with his Cantonese name in the local dialect, can be understood as a self-in-place (*dwelling*) identification with the rural land and villagers in New Territories West (*identity, relation*). Although Chu has an English name, "Eddie," he does not include it as part of his Facebook name. This can be interpreted as a discursive tie to emphasize that he is a local Hong Konger (*identity*), that he uses a particular way of speaking a name, with the surname first, which is a culturally grounded way of introducing oneself and relating to other locals.

In the banner photo, the discursive hub of dwelling becomes more explicit in depicting Chu as a Hong Kong LEGCO election candidate, with his candidate number stated: "Number 20: Chu Hoi Dick" (*identity*). The emphasis in the policy proposals of his election campaign, namely "digging into the under-the-table transactions between government officials, businessmen, rural land-lords, and criminal organizations," fit into the discursive hubs of *action* and *dwelling* grounded in the local political context. By uncovering "the under-the-table transactions," Chu demonstrates an awareness of the "stories" surrounding rural land and rights, and what he has promised the public he will *act* on in his lawmaker capacity. By using the second person personal pronoun, "you," he refers to the general public of Hong Kong in reported speech as *relating* to a larger social media population ("You asked if I am afraid"/"You asked if I will continue to tell the truth"). Using direct speech and responding with an exclamation point in both sentences ("Yes, I am afraid!"/"I surely will!"), Chu inspires strong *emotion* about his determination to voice the truth despite fears for his personal safety.

An analysis of Chu's Facebook main page sheds light on the socio-cultural meanings radiated by the discursive hub of dwelling that he used in this campaign to relate to the situated public. The repeated theme of rural land justice was articulated in the re-emphasis of the explicit discursive hubs: 1) his name being given in relation to a place – Pat Heung – and the presentation of his LEGCO candidate number both confirmed his local rural identity and status; and 2) his mention of dwelling in one of Hong Kong's rural villages emphasized that he represented justice for rural villagers and would take action by pursuing fearless honesty. The radiant of cultural meanings from the discursive hub implies this stance: a LEGCO lawmaker interacting with various stakeholders (government officials, businessmen, rural landlords, and criminal organizations) about social issues involving conflicting interests. The deep cultural meaning that Chu communicated through the banner was: when handling Hong Kong's land justice issues, law-makers should take action to protect public interests.

The discursive hub of dwelling thus sets the main tone of Chu's political public relations campaign, grounded in a response to the rise of post-handover Hong Kong localism (Chan, 2017). As a contextual background, Hong Kong had been facing social and political tensions to integrate with mainland China following the handover. Chu's cultural discourse of dwelling thus not only served as a geographical and social marker of his election campaign (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001), but also set the postcolonial Hong Kong identity, emotion, and action apart from the central-peripheral tension of mainland China's hegemony (Chan, 2017). Chu's communication repeatedly made explicit his identity, emotion, and action as a member of the grassroots local public who had been suffering from the transformation crisis in Hong Kong. Chu situated his communication as a prototype of the socio-cultural imagination of the public in the place he and the public called home. Thus, Chu connected the identity of "LEGCO election candidate" to the collective identity, social feelings, and action attached to Hong Kong through the discursive hub of dwelling.

6.2. Relation-oriented communication with the public through a cultural discourse of relation

An interrelated and similarly explicit discursive hub of relation can be observed, one that emphasizes Chu's relation to the public in the midst of the social and political tensions faced in post-handover Hong Kong. The most widely commented on post regarded him

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[1] Pat Heung ("八鄉") is a rural area located in the west of New Territories, which comprises 30 villages with about 3000 residents in total. The Chinese name of Pat Heung can be literally translated as 'eight ("八") rural hometowns' ("鄉").

八鄉朱凱迪 Chu Hoi Dick was live.
September 4 ·
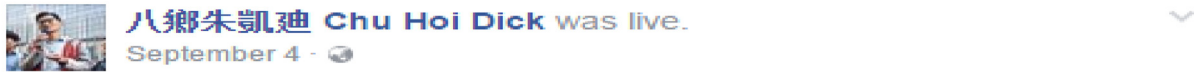
【突發：朱凱迪團隊被可疑車輛跟蹤】

日前，朱凱迪團隊從多方面收到訊息，指有勢力人士將會於9月4日投票日騷擾朱凱迪團隊的街站、義工及朱凱迪本人。

今早七點開始，朱凱迪本人已被RX299跟蹤，在元朗YOHO MidTown到街站後再多一輛RY9972跟蹤，司機自稱為「支持者」。其中有一乘坐RY9972穿黑衣男士不斷在街站旁拍照「點相」。

由於朱凱迪團隊已從多個來源得悉將被跟蹤、遇襲威脅，為安全起見，團隊昨天已向警民關係組備案，今天事發時亦立即報警求助。

面對威嚇，不會妥協，希望大家把握決定未來的機會，投票！

Fig. 2. Screenshot of Chu's Facebook post on 4 September, 2016, with an English translation.

reporting being "stalked" by two suspicious cars at noon on election day, on 4 September, 2016. With a live video that was viewed by more than 220,000 Facebook users, the Facebook post, shown below, was shared 1156 times, amassing 1046 comments (Fig. 2).

This Facebook post highlights the fact that Chu Hoi Dick and his team were under threat during the LEGCO election. Chu's post indicated explicit *social relations* between certain parties (lines 3–4: "volunteers of Chu Hoi Dick's team and Chu Hoi Dick himself;" line 3: "gangsters;" line 12: "police;" and line 14: "everyone"). Using the discursive hub of relation, Chu contrasted the "threats" and "the threatened," implicitly pointing toward the fragility of the "visible" candidate versus the powerfulness of the "invisible" gangsters. Chu also went beyond the dichotomy of "candidate" and "gangster" to relate the threats to other social actors, namely the courageous "everyone" (the general public) and the passive "police." Implicitly, the cultural meanings conveyed by the Facebook post were the contrasting forces: *the threatening force* (cars and the man in the black shirt) as suspicious, with "bad intentions" and posing a "threat of … attack" versus *the fearless threatened candidate* (Chu and his team) who will accept "no compromise." Both forces were described using the active voice, with the blackmailer stalking and taking photos of Chu, while Chu's team was also active in reporting to the police and calling for public support. Implicitly communicated in Chu's Facebook post was the police's passivity. This formed the basis of the call to "everyone" in Hong Kong to act on behalf of the city's future and vote in the face of political threats (Alinsky, 1971).

Interweaving the prominent discursive hubs of relation and dwelling, Chu radiates meanings concerning not only social relations among social actors, but also place-based relations between the current election and the future of Hong Kong. Chu communicates the divided social relations through the meanings of *dwelling* (line 3: "street stations … of Chu Hoi Dick;" line 7–8: "YOHO Midtown in Yuen Long;" line 12: "Police Community Relations Office"), *action* (line 2: "received message;" line 7–11: "stalked" and "threatened to be attacked;" line 11–13: "report the case to police;" line 15: "vote"), and *emotion* (line 11: "threatened" and line 14: "blackmail," "no compromise," "hope"). It is noteworthy that Chu's posts refer to threats that require local contextual knowledge. For instance, line 6, the use of quotation marks for the suspicious driver who "claimed to be a 'supporter'" indicates that the readers would know exactly who this "invisible" power was that was threatening Chu's team. These meta-commentary meanings conveyed in the place-based relational cultural discourse of Chu's post mobilized the collective action of voting as part of the political public relations communication. Chu's communication created an emotional sense of remaining unintimidated while protecting the rule of law in the "place" that is Hong Kong and when reflecting on local identity, as well as relations between the candidate and public, and public-public.

6.3. Online political talk about Chu's 2016 LEGCO election: From resonance in Chu's place-based relational discourse to collective engagement in political public relations practice

Chu's place-based relational discourse resonates with the online public's collective everyday experiences and local political, social, and cultural knowledge of Hong Kong. Appendix A has examples of how the online network responded to and canvassed for Chu in the most popular post on Chu's Facebook page on 4 September, based on the five hubs or radiants of identity, emotion, action, relating, and dwelling. The key terms and slogans that circulated on Facebook among the online public about Chu's candidacy included, "Chu will help to preserve our homes here" (*action, relation, dwelling*); "Come together to protect our bro Chu. Bro, we support you!" (*action, relation, emotion*); "We are all Chu Hoi Dick" (*identity, relation*); "We are together fighting bravely against dark forces, for land justice!" (*relation, emotion, action*); 'Hong Kongers need lawmakers like Chu' (*identity*). By making sense of the tracked key terms, the grounded online public notion of identity, socio-cultural action, and the emotional dimension of place-based relational discourse (for instance, the reference to "our home here" and "that dark force") become explicit.

The political talk of the online public became a symbolically and meaningfully constructed socio-cultural visualization of the LEGCO election as the future of Hong Kong. By taking part in talking about Chu's Facebook posts, the public became more than just the audience of Chu's political public relations campaign. The online public implicitly embraced the place-based relatedness in Chu's discourse: on Facebook, the online public self-identified as "Hong Kong citizens" collectively ("we"), relating to Chu as the role model of Hong Kong identity ("Hong Kongers"). The online public also valued Chu's action to fight for the public's interests ("against dark

forces") and his determination to protect the public ("preserve our homes," "fighting bravely"). The public's discussion also converged in the appreciation of Chu's care for Hong Kong ("home") where the online public dwells ("here") and as the candidate to whom they relate ("bro"), will act for ("protect"), and admire ("support").

Such linking of place-based relational discourse between candidate and public, through a public-public social network, generated a multi-layered political public relations network. This network was created not only by the candidate, but also by the engaged social media users, as both the major stakeholders and the second level of political public relations communicators. Resonating with 1) Chu's communication with the online public, and 2) the key terms and discursive hubs found in the overall political talk, the online public talked about Chu in multiple layers of their social networks: "Chu is the right LEGCO candidate to vote for." Being able to not only communicate to the public, but also engage them in election canvassing, candidate protection, and vote casting are important functions of political public relations (Painter, 2015; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011).

7. Conclusion

7.1. Advancing political public relations theory and method using CuDA

This study introduced a cultural discourse perspective into the field of political public relations. The empirical analysis demonstrates the links between the place-based relational discourse of the local public and the election candidate. This study sheds light on how CuDA can be employed to capture the grounded social interaction during the marketing of a political candidate and an election campaign. Moreover, it expands the notion that stakeholders' engagement in political public relations activities is not dependent only on the relationship between the candidate and the stakeholders (Painter, 2015), but also on political public relations and society (Edwards, 2016; Edwards and Hodges, 2011).

As political public relations are "co-constituted in and constitutive of its practices" (Stenberg, 2016, p.21), election candidates not only need to understand voters' local concerns and expectations, build relationships and reputation, and gain voter support during an election, but also have place-based and relational relevance for the public. In other words, through the five discursive hubs, an election candidate can achieve interaction with the online public at a candidate-public level and engage self-initiated public relations communicators to conduct public-to-public election canvassing through social networks.

7.2. Political public relations as a place-based relational communication practice

This exploratory CuDA study responds to the call for more research on the socio-cultural perspective of political public relations (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011), specifically in the area of the marketing of a political candidate and campaigning during an election. In terms of both theory and method, the CuDA analysis shows the importance of grounding political public relations as a place-based relational discourse. As Carbaugh and Cerulli (2013) argued, communication practice is culturally distinct, socially contested, and individually adopted place-based communication and action. Political public relations, communication practice, social relations, and place work together in providing context for one another between candidate and public, and public-public, in alignment with CuDA.

The analysis of cultural discourse in this paper illustrates Chu's communication with his online public as a cultural discourse of dwelling and relating, and reveals how the online political talk around Chu represents engaged political public relations. Incorporating a culturally grounded perspective that specifically addresses local political, social, and cultural concerns in relation to identity, relations, action, emotion, and place-making, has become particularly important in resonating with the online public. If political public relations can get through the first layer candidate to public communication – of conveying the socio-cultural relevance of the candidate to online public – the scale, depth, and networked multi-layers of public-public canvassing can then be garnered. It is suggested that future researchers employ CuDA to study the marketing of political candidates and campaigning during elections in other contexts.

Appendix A

Examples of five discursive hubs illustrated in comments on Chu's Facebook post

Original Facebook comment (in traditional Chinese with Hong Kong Cantonese dialect)	Translated English version	Discursive hubs
1 用票趕走黑勢力	Use votes to eliminate the dark force	action
2 撐朱凱迪嘅街坊，都走出黎保 3 護朱凱迪，同佢一齊拉票，人 4 多，啲古惑仔就唔敢亂黎 5	Neighbors who support Chu Hoi Dick come together to protect Chu Hoi Dick, canvassing support for him together. With more people there, the gangsters will not dare to get any worse.	
6 大家有能力既請幫手睇住亞迪 7	Those who can, please help protect "Ah Dick" (Chu Hoi Dick).	
8 大家得閒嘅話，一齊去幫手， 9 對抗官商鄉黑勾結 10	If anyone has time, come together to help, fight against government, businessmen, rural landlords' under-the-table transactions.	
11 要保朱凱迪人生安全，必定要 12 送他入議會	To protect Chu Hoi Dick's personal safety, we must send him into the LEGCO	
13 馮敏兒: 愈來愈擔心朱凱迪，選 14 舉原來咁危險，候選人隨時佢 15 警察抄牌驅捕！小心呀，最愛 16 是你了！ 17	I'm getting more and more worried about Chu Hoi Dick. I'm just starting to realize that elections can be so dangerous. The candidate in danger can be ignored by the police. Be careful. You are my favorite!	emotion: worried, fear, care
18 萬事小心！邪不能勝正！	Take care! Evil can't overcome justice!	
19 有無朋友在附近啊？傍一傍阿 20 迪丫，有D擔心佢安全 21 22	Any friends nearby? Come together to protect "Ah Dick", I am kind of worried about his safety.	emotion: worried, protective
23 兄弟，洗濕左頭，點都撐落 24 去，你如果有乜事，我地都十 25 分明白同知道邊D人搞事！黑 26 底土豪	Bro, you've worked so hard. Hang on in there! If you have any misfortune, we are very much aware of who created the mess! Rich landlords with criminal support!	relation & emotion: supportive
27 做呢 d 污糟手段，只會令更多 28 人仗義支持，票投朱凱迪，用 29 一票維護正義	Dirty tricks will only call for more support for justice. Vote for Chu Hoi Dick; vote to protect justice.	
30 10 票比你，唔好辜負我哋！繼 31 續努力！	10 votes for you. Don't let us down! Keep going!	action emotion: supportive
32 咩人咩社會呀依家？玩跟蹤玩 33 恐嚇咁劣嘅行為😂😂😂有票 34 喺手嘅人請投明智嘅一票唔該 35 🙏🙏🙏🙏 36	What kind of people and society do we have now? Stalking and threatening people is low 😂😂😂 Those who can vote, please cast a wise vote - please🙏 🙏🙏🙏	action
37 如我是廸那區選民，我一定選 38 他，他才是真正為人民服務的 39 人。我們都是朱凱迪!	If I were an eligible voter for Dick's election area, I would definitely vote for him. He is the real civil servant. We are all Chu Hoi Dick!	dwelling & identity
40 呢到香港黎 ga, 係我地屋企!你 41 班爬街返大陸 la!	This is Hong Kong here; this is our home! You f**king get back to Mainland (China)!	dwelling, identity, & emotion: anger
42 萬事小心！精神上「邪不能勝 43 正」但肉體上堅可以打護打殘 44 您，大家會撐您在這往立會路 45 上的「最後一里」堅守挺進， 46 加油	Be careful of everything! Although spiritually "evil can't overcome justice", physically they could do anything to hurt and destroy you. We will support you persistently to the "last mile" into LEGCO. We'll fight together...	emotion: worried, supportive relation & action

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