

## Staying Tuned for Censored Information Sources? A Media Habit Approach to Immigrants' Information Practices

ABBY YOURAN QIN<sup>1</sup>  
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Why do immigrants opt for censored information sources even in the presence of various alternatives? Adopting Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, this study bridges literature on media habit, censorship, and acculturation to explain the continued use of censored sources among mainland Chinese students (MCSs) in Hong Kong. Drawing from media diaries and semistructured interviews of 17 MCSs, I demonstrate how MCSs' information practices and political attitudes are influenced by behavioral and algorithmic cues, online and offline networks, information ecosystems in Hong Kong and mainland China, as well as their own cultural-political identities. I further propose a generalized research approach to immigrants' media habits that connects intrapersonal deliberation, microlevel contextual cues, mesolevel social networks, and macrolevel structures.

*Keywords: habitus, field, media habit, censorship, acculturation, selective exposure, China, Hong Kong*

Censorship is "any exercise of power that intervenes in the process of sharing information and ideas between otherwise willing senders and willing receivers" (George, 2020, p. 1). Some research elaborates on "willing senders" to raise awareness of soft censorship manipulating the senders' willingness to speak (Lee & Chan, 2009). Some focus on the receivers' level of *unwillingness* to receive certain information and reflect on circumstances where censorship is justified (Veninga, 2016). However, scant research examines receivers' willing use of censored information sources. Counterintuitively, people from authoritarian countries frequently choose tightly controlled regime media (Wojcieszak, Nisbet, Kremer, Behrouzian, & Glynn, 2019). Even after migrating to Hong Kong and getting more options of news outlets and social media platforms beyond the Great Firewall (GFW), mainland Chinese students (MCSs) still prefer censored sources from mainland China (Qin, Cheng, & Beattie, 2020). Sustained use of such channels contributes to the proregime sentiments of MCSs in Hong Kong (Wong, Ma, & Lam, 2018) and other countries (Feng, 2011).

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Abby Youran Qin: yaqin@wisc.edu

Date submitted: 2023-02-13

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the substantive guidance of Cherian George and Luwei Rose Luqiu, as well as the helpful comments from Donna S. C. Chu, Ven-Hwei Lo, and Céline Yunya Song. I appreciate Lewis A. Friedland's kind and diligent proofreading and theoretical insights. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

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Why do MCSs opt for censored sources when there is a wide range of alternatives? A political communication scholar may attribute this phenomenon to the tendency of selective exposure. An acculturation expert may be tempted to invoke theories about cultural identities and immigrant communities. If you ask a MCS directly, however, their answer may simply be one word—"habit." Adopting Bourdieu's (1977) pair of concepts, habitus, and field, I seek to systematically organize literature on media habit, selective exposure, and acculturation to explain factors shaping MCSs' information practices in Hong Kong.

"Habitus" is a set of durable yet alterable practices, values, and dispositions internalized by individuals from their "field," the sociocultural arena they inhabit. Habitus is durable as it reproduces itself through the reinforcing feedback loop between its behavioral and attitudinal components. However, rather than firmly fixed, habitus is still subject to individuals' negotiations with their sociocultural surroundings, especially on drastic changes in the field they inhabit. The dynamic exchange happening within habitus and between habitus and field vividly captures immigrants' "resocialization" struggles in host societies, and thus, serves as an apt framework for my analysis. Based on a comparison of 17 cases, each studied through a combination of media diaries and semistructured interviews, my study provides a comprehensive account of MCSs' media habits. It reveals how intrapersonal deliberation, microlevel contextual cues, mesolevel social networks, and macrolevel information structure and social culture jointly shape MCSs' information practices, and accordingly, their interpretation of current affairs and political matters in home and host societies.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Information Under Censorship or Information From Home?***

#### *Consumption of Censored Information Sources*

Censorship has been a major theme of Chinese political communication research. Researchers have demonstrated how people adopt various strategies to circumvent censorship (Mou, Wu, & Atkin, 2016). Those who have never used circumvention tools are found to be less opposed to the idea of censorship (Shen & Zhang, 2018). Such research falls implicitly under the selective exposure paradigm, which regards people's information practices as outcomes of their political attitudes (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

A different approach is exemplified by Taneja and Wu (2014), who highlight cultural proximity, instead of the presence/absence of firewalls, as the main factor driving audience traffic on the Internet. However, even if people do not deliberately reach out to uncensored sources, absence of the GFW may still lead to more incidental exposure to such sources (Pan & Roberts, 2020). Overall, the diverse literature on censorship shows that people's interaction with censorship can take on multiple forms: intentional circumvention, habitual adherence, coincidental alignment, incidental trespass, and so on.

Censored sources, though not necessarily consumed for political purposes, have political implications. By manipulating information available to their citizens, authoritarian regimes can dilute the impact of negative news (Zhu, Lu, & Shi, 2013), scapegoat failures, claim achievements (Rozenas & Stukal,

2019), and mobilize public support through skillful propaganda (Stockmann, 2010). The information practices of mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong and other countries provide a natural site where we can observe how people's information sources deviate from, cut across, or fall inside the boundary of censorship, explore the motivations behind their information choices, and illustrate how political and *apolitical* media use resist or facilitate immigrants' *political* resocialization.

#### *Consumption of Home-Society Sources*

In line with Taneja and Wu's (2014) cultural proximity account, acculturation research shows that immigrants from various cultural backgrounds keep seeking information from home-society media (Rozenas & Stukal, 2019). Home-society families and friends also serve as important social support for immigrants (Ju, Sandel, & Thinyane, 2019). Furthermore, instead of merging into local societies, immigrants usually form ethnic communities in host societies (Woo & Wang, 2023). In sum, immigrants seek to retain cultural identity by maintaining transnational connections to their home societies through economic, social, and communication practices (Lin, Song, & Ball-Rokeach, 2010). Such connections help them cope with uncertainty and comfort attachment to the home society (Lim & Pham, 2016).

Political communication scholars' understanding of censored media consumption can benefit from acculturation theories' in-depth examination of how immigrants' cultural identities and social network may coincidentally lead to consumption of censored sources. Acculturation theories, on the other hand, can be supplemented by political communication's sharp focus on political implications of certain home-society information consumption, especially for immigrants from places with heavy information censorship. In addition, apart from a handful of studies (Pan & Roberts, 2020; Roberts, 2018), both strands of literature emphasize intentional media use while overlooking the unconscious part of information consumption sustained by personal habits and nudged by microlevel virtual and physical environments. To better bridge both sets of literature and bring in the role of habits and contextual cues, I will use Bourdieu's (1977) framework of habitus and field to explain MCSs' use of censored mainland Chinese sources and explore such information practices' potential influence on their interpretation of current affairs and political matters in home and host societies.

#### ***Pre- and Postmigration Fields and Immigrants' Habitus***

Bourdieu (1977) set out as a Lévi-Straussian cultural anthropologist, believing that human actions are based solely on the "internalization of externality" (p. 72). However, his fieldwork in Algeria yielded contradictory findings. He realized that community norms by no means defined actions of its members. Rather, these norms constituted a "field" that limited the actors' choices and conditioned their behaviors (Bourdieu, 1977). The field, through socialization, shapes its actors' "habitus," a natural and intuitive way (from the actor's point of view) of navigating through life. Habitus, however, is not a timely updated perfect reflection of the field. Some human behaviors are consistent and foreseeable even when they are no longer strictly regulated by the external structures that produced them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Delineating the delicate dynamics of a socialized individual navigating between fields with distinct organizing logics, the habitus framework has been widely adopted to study immigrants' negotiation of identities (Xu, 2019), lifestyles (Kelly & Lusic, 2006), and socioeconomic wellbeing (Guarnizo, 1997). Although such inquiries have

not yet been extended to the realm of media consumption, I believe a Bourdieusian framework is helpful in organizing a diverse set of communication theories (media habit theories that emphasize unconscious media use as well as selective exposure and uses and gratification theories that emphasize user agency) and acculturation research (emphasizing cultural identities and communities) to explain immigrants' media use.

#### *Habitus Developed by Premigration Socialization*

Habitus is a set of durable practices, values, and dispositions. Besides a behavioral habit of using mainland Chinese channels, the informational habitus of MCSs also incorporates an array of values and dispositions. In the absence of other choices, most MCSs used and trusted mainland Chinese information sources before migration (Dickson, 2016). Such heavily filtered sources, combined with a carefully calibrated education scheme (Cantoni, Chen, Yang, Yuchtman, & Zhang, 2014), have cultivated strong nationalism among the Chinese youth. Many have also internalized a concept of democracy that, rooted in the Confucian tradition, values economic growth and stability over democratic procedures and accepts paternalistic meritocracy (Cabestan, 2019).

Premigration socialization also manifests itself in cultural predispositions. The mainland Chinese information environment is characterized by the abundant supply of cultural products and strategic manipulation of political content (Wu, 2018). Despite limited political freedom, people's needs for entertainment and cultural products are well satiated within the GFW. Outside mainland China, however, even Taiwan and Hong Kong sites are culturally distant from MCSs, because of their focus on local issues as well as use of traditional Chinese and different writing styles. Moreover, new MCSs have neither knowledge of the media landscape in Hong Kong and other countries nor experience in using overseas social media platforms.

#### *Postmigration Renegotiation of Habitus*

Hong Kong is a congenial field for maintaining MCSs' premigration habitus. International students usually stick together instead of befriending local students (Lim & Pham, 2016; Woo & Wang, 2023). For MCSs in Hong Kong, this tendency is further facilitated by the large proportion of their kind in Hong Kong universities (Concourse for Self-financing Post-secondary Education [CSPE], 2020). A homogeneous friend circle increases MCSs' exposure to mainland Chinese media and makes them less motivated to consume Hong Kong media, because of the lack of anticipated discussions about local issues (Atkin, 1972).

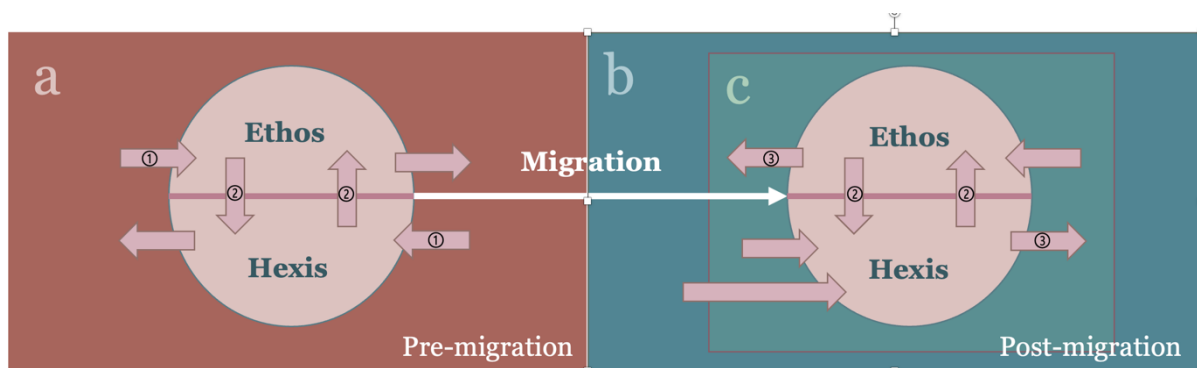
Nonetheless, Hong Kong also provides MCSs with possibilities to alter their media habits, especially at the time of this study when National Security Law (NSL) had not yet taken effect. First, in a place outside the GFW, incidental exposure to previously blocked information is unavoidable. MCSs may encounter sensitive political information when surfing the Internet, receive political leaflets on the street, or get to know several prodemocracy Hong Kong peers. Second, some MCSs actively reach out for previously inaccessible information to satisfy their curiosities or get a more balanced political view. Such behaviors are consistent with studies showing that people sometimes bolster their political beliefs through counterarguing (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006), and that "political junkies" deliberately seek counterattitudinal information (Dubois & Blank, 2018). At the time of this study, the Hong Kong government

was just starting to crackdown on prodemocracy media. There was still a diverse media landscape composed of a relatively high-quality public broadcast network (RTHK), mainstream media on a wide political spectrum from pan-democracy to proestablishment, and various alternative media with different political orientations (Wang, 2018). Even after censorship dismantled the local media market (Davidson, 2022), people living in Hong Kong can still use overseas social media platforms, guaranteeing MCSs broad access to non-regime-controlled information.

In sum, most MCSs have been indoctrinated with proregime behaviors, values, and dispositions before migration. For them, Hong Kong is an elastic place allowing both preservation and change of their habitus. I will now zoom in to the reproduction and negotiation of MCSs' "media habitus" in Hong Kong.

### ***Reproduction and Renegotiation of Media Habitus***

Individuals are conditioned by the social structure and social relations they inhabit. Every field, from as small as a family to as big as a society, has its distinct organizing logics, taken-for-granted values, behavioral rules, and definition of "capital" (Leander, 2010). As demonstrated by Figure 1, individuals internalize logics of the field that socializes them (process 1) and form a habitus consisting of ethos—beliefs and disposition, and hexis—behavioral habits, including the concept of "media habit" discussed in communication literature (Yoon, Kim, & Eom, 2011). Hexis and ethos reflect and influence each other (process 2). "Durable" and "transposable" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53), habitus does not change as soon as one migrates from one place (box a) to another (box b). Instead, it keeps reproducing itself in the ethos-hexis interaction (process 2). Habitus also influences the field (process 3), essentially finding or creating a field (box c) favorable for its own reproduction. In this section, I will flesh out Bourdieu's (1977) habitus-field framework with communication and acculturation theories, to better conceptualize the reproduction and renegotiation of immigrants' information practices.



**Figure 1. A habitus-field framework for understanding immigrants' information practices.**

As highlighted by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), even rational choices can operate in a pragmatic and oftentimes unconscious way once internalized as mental dispositions. Although information acquisition demands deliberate processing, choosing information sources does not. In fact, over half of people's media consumption is habitual (Wood, Quinn, & Kashy, 2002), and this is likely to be an underestimation (LaRose,

2010). MCSs' largely habitual media practices create opportunities for the censored sources they used inside the GFW to continuously influence them after their migration to a plural information environment.

*RQ1: What (social) media platforms, functions, and channels constitute MCSs' media habit?*

#### *Physical and Virtual Contexts*

Verplanken and Wood (2006) define habits as "a form of automaticity in responding that develops as people repeat actions in stable circumstances" (p. 91), emphasizing the context of habits, especially behavioral cues (Botvinick, Niv, & Barto, 2009). Some media habits are also formed in relation to other activities. Examples include checking social media updates while drinking morning coffee, going through e-mails upon arrival at work, and reading books before going to bed. Certain technical (notifications from mobile devices), spatial (physical surroundings), and mental cues (mental activities) may break into the flow of physical activities and connect individuals to the virtual world on their devices (Bayer, Campbell, & Ling, 2016). In the virtual world, there are again cues from carefully designed user interfaces or individuals' own customizations that may nudge users to certain applications or websites. From a media habit perspective, it is important to consider the role played by these microlevel cues in MCSs' media use.

*RQ2a: How do MCSs' interactions with physical and virtual context factor into their consumption of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong (or overseas) media?*

After being steered to a certain platform by contextual cues, users may again find the contents they see to be heavily affected by algorithms (Bodó, Helberger, Eskens, & Möller, 2019). Although acculturation research highlights the tremendous influence of digital media throughout different migration stages (Moran, 2023), it mostly conceptualizes digital media as tools used by immigrants for various purposes instead of environments immigrants inhabit and get influenced by. The algorithm may promote or inhibit a user's habit of browsing certain topics by either repeatedly feeding them relevant content or prioritizing other topics. Although worried about their privacy and concerned by their autonomy in determining the information they get, users lack knowledge of how algorithms work (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019), let alone the agency to effectively control their social media feed (Monzer, Moeller, Helberger, & Eskens, 2020).

*RQ2b: How do MCSs' interactions with algorithm factor into their consumption of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong (or overseas) media?*

#### *Immediate and Secondary Fields*

Despite habit research's general emphasis on contextual cues, media habits are relatively less context dependent. As put by LaRose (2010), "media are so deeply embedded in culture that the networks of such associations are quite seemingly endless" (p. 200). The limitless triggers of media habits make such habits resilient to changes in the environment and render the conventional approach concerning microlevel cues inadequate. Attention to the broader sociocultural environment that enables and constrains media habits is necessary. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of field is apt for this kind of analysis.

“Field” can be used to analyze organizations of varying scopes and scales. The previous discussion of mainland China and Hong Kong as pre- and postmigration fields is oversimplified, as both are huge societies hosting myriads of smaller fields. As mentioned above, international students may flock together and form a field distinct from the local society. Even within MCSs, individuals may differ in their physical living environment, affiliations to virtual communities, online and offline social networks, and so on. Having observed this, Xia (2022) highlights how an individual’s lifeworld of online and offline communities as well as personal lived experiences shape their engagement with news, also in the context of Chinese immigrants.

Fundamentally, the field inhabited by individuals is layered, with a relatively distant general social background (the secondary field) and a direct contacting interface (the immediate field). Although individuals are influenced by both fields, the impact of the immediate field comprising the physical and virtual environment they frequent and the social network they maintain can be far more important in the reproduction and renegotiation of their media habits.

*RQ3: How does MCSs’ interaction with the immediate and secondary fields factor into their consumption of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong (or overseas) media?*

#### *Between Ethos and Hexis: Cultural and Political Identification in Media Choices*

In Bourdieu’s theorization, habitus consists of both ethos and hexis. While hexis, commonly known as “habits,” is the physical embodiment of habitus, it does not cover the full picture of habitus. Hexis and ethos, the attitudinal component of habitus, are mutually constitutive and in constant negotiation with each other. Individuals’ media hexis both reflect and constitute their identities.

Although the ethos-hexis interaction often happens outside individuals’ conscious awareness, the *negotiation* between ethos and hexis can also take on an active form. Assuming habitual actions as default, sociologists propose reflexivity as a mechanism to cope with contingencies (Archer, 2003). Abundant literature on acculturation shows that renegotiation of media choices is almost inevitable once immigrants enter their host societies. Not only do they need to change their media habits to cope with new responsibilities (Le-Phuong, Lams, & Cock, 2022) and carefully calibrate their social media posts for integration into host societies (Mitra & Evansluong, 2019), but they even need to explore new ways to participate in home-society politics (Aricat, 2015). Aricat (2015) has also observed that immigrants appropriate digital media in different ways that suit their political preferences. Migrating to a different information environment, thus, offers an important juncture for MCSs to reflect on and *renegotiate* their media habits. Although the external environment provides opportunities for such negotiations, the results depend largely on MCSs’ internal predispositions. In line with the plethora of literature on political selective exposure (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) and uses and gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974), audiences have the agency to choose media sources for political, social, and cultural gratifications. The habitus-field framework, while pointing out the rarity of active media choices and highlighting the prevalence of automatic, unconscious, and habitual media exposure, does not negate the role played by political and cultural identities (immigrants’ identification with cultures of their home and host societies) in people’s conscious deliberation of media choices. To better understand immigrants’ renegotiation of media habits, I propose the following research questions:

RQ4: *What roles does cultural identification play in MCSs' consumption of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong (or overseas) media?*

RQ5: *What roles does political orientation play in MCSs' consumption of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong (or overseas) media?*

### Methods

I studied 17 cases, each based on a three-week media diary and a one- to three-hour semistructured interview. Participants were sampled sequentially in three batches (five in the first batch, six each in the second and third batches) from six Hong Kong universities following the case study logic proposed by Small (2009). The first batch of participants was purposefully recruited to cover different gender, political positions, educational backgrounds, and years spent in Hong Kong. The following batches were recruited based on findings yielded by the previous batch to either literally (examine whether patterns found in a case hold for similar cases) or theoretically (examine whether patterns found in a case hold for disparate cases) replicate the findings, until saturation was achieved. As will be shown in my findings, demographic variations manifest themselves as different contingencies introducing individuals into different immediate fields, which, in turn, produce different political and cultural identifications as well as information practices. However, they do not change the generalized role of field-habitus interaction in maintaining and reforming immigrants' media habits. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the informants' profiles alongside discussion of demographic features' manifestations in my findings.

Each participant was requested to keep a media diary. The media diary survey included six sections: interpersonal discussion, paper media, news applications, social media platforms, websites, and other media formats. I adopted constructed days and weeks in the media diary design. Every day at a specific time (noon for morning, 6:00 p.m. for afternoon, and 10:00 p.m. for evening media diaries respectively), participants received a reminder asking them to indicate their media diets during the given time slot. Their three weeks' responses were combined to form a whole week's information diet (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Constructed Week Illustration.**

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1	Morning (M)	A	E	M	A	E	M
Week 2	Afternoon (A)	E	M	A	E	M	A
Week 3	Evening (E)	M	A	E	M	A	E

After obtaining the media diaries, I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant physically or virtually via Zoom. During each interview, I went through the media list compiled from the interviewee's media diaries together with the interviewee, asking their experiences on each medium and reasons for using the medium. For social media, I further asked for interviewees' subscription lists and their stories with each account they subscribed to. I also asked about interviewees' political trajectories.



### **Situated Reproduction of Media Habits**

In line with the habitus thesis and communication scholars' observations, MCSs' information practices are mostly habitual. First, all interviewees repeatedly consume a limited range of media outlets and mobile applications. There are 119 unique platform-level sources identified in participants' media diaries, among which 56 are mentioned more than once (Appendix 2). Second, MCSs have designated specific functions to every media/application they use and developed certain browsing patterns for each source. For example, WeChat Moments are usually browsed during fragmented time, while foreign media are often read with more cognitive input. Third, their information intake from social media is roughly predictable as they have stable contacts and subscription lists, though some interviewees are increasingly reliant on the algorithm (rather than subscriptions) to curate their social media feed.

Overall, Chinese platforms dominate MCSs' *social media* repertoire. Overseas social media are used by fewer MCSs in a less sticky way. Most mainland Chinese news media are accessed through their WeChat public accounts. Among standalone *news media* channels, however, Hong Kong and overseas ones are more popular. In fact, it is easier for MCSs to adapt to the language of Hong Kong news media than that of Hong Kong social media. There is little difference in the formal writing style adopted by Hong Kong and mainland Chinese news media, compared with the huge disparity between colloquial Cantonese and Mandarin used by Hong Kong and mainland Chinese netizens. Moreover, some local media outlets (e.g., Initium) provide both traditional and simplified Chinese versions of all news reports and analyses.

### ***Human and Machine's Joint Effort in Maintaining Media Habits***

In line with existing research (Botvinick et al., 2009), my informants also report many contextually situated media activities. Consider a quote from an interviewee:

When I go to the washroom or get stuck while writing, I would open WeChat Moments or public accounts. I never browse Douban or Zhihu in the office, since I find it a waste of my productive time. However, WeChat is different. I would not even realize it. When I feel a bit off as if I need to smoke a cigarette, I would habitually grab my phone, open WeChat with my muscle memory, and read. Then, I would feel as if I let off a plume of smoke in the flow of information. I would feel relaxed and get back to my work. (Female, ambivalent, PhD student, spent 2.5 years in Hong Kong)

Such explanations prevail across all interviewees' accounts for their media activities. Some read Google News on the metro, some use TikTok after finishing all the planned work for a day; some save new anime releases to watch while having meals . . . My informants' stories demonstrate the interplay between contextual factors and personal intentions in shaping media habits. No matter how habitual one's information practices are, such practices always date back to an initial purposive process of figuring out how to refresh one's mind, kill time during long commutes, or reward oneself for a day's hard work. Their habits result from countless repeats of initially intentional actions calibrated for specific circumstances.

Another noticeable feature of MCSs' information sources is that they are predominantly online, resulting in a special way of content selection jointly accomplished by the human brain and the computer algorithm. Instead of demanding sovereignty in deciding the content of their information flow (Monzer et al., 2020), my informants care more about whether the content they get is palatable. Most informants not only rely heavily on algorithm curation but also actively help algorithms curate their feed. Although a subscription is traditionally done by clicking the "follow" or "subscribe" button, my interviewees click into the content every time it appears in the information feed so that the algorithm will recommend such content more often. After several clicks, such content becomes a regular part of their feeds. Browsing such content also becomes routinized as part of their habit.

The process of joint information curation by human and algorithms is by no means unique to MCSs. However, it has special implications on immigrants' media habits. By curating their feeds together with the algorithm, my informants manage to customize social media platforms into congenial information environments. Meanwhile, they also grow more dependent on these platforms. This phenomenon partially explains the stickiness of Chinese social media platforms. First, incorporated in MCSs' media habits earlier than Hong Kong and overseas sources, many Chinese platforms enjoy an incumbency advantage—MCSs have already personalized their news feed on these platforms. Second, MCSs' rich social networks on Chinese platforms make it easier for such platforms to tailor information feeds. Last, MCSs may find content on Chinese platforms more attractive because of cultural proximity.

### ***Social Reproduction of Media Habits***

Most MCSs' current media habit is a mixture of information practices in the mainland and new information habits formed after coming to Hong Kong. Counterintuitively, most MCSs' list of mainland Chinese information sources (usually subscribed through WeChat public accounts) keeps expanding after coming to Hong Kong, while their repertoire of Hong Kong and overseas sources remains stagnant. This "anomaly" can be understood only by studying the immediate (instead of secondary) virtual and physical fields directly inhabited by MCSs.

On the one hand, the pervasiveness of WeChat in the mainland has made it almost a constant in MCSs' media diets. Social networking, instead of information seeking, constitutes most interviewees' primary goal of using WeChat. Nonetheless, they often run into public topics in discussions and on WeChat Moments where friends share their recent updates. Such encounters not only keep MCSs in touch with what is happening in the mainland but also directly lead to discoveries of new mainland Chinese news channels, because of the dual function of WeChat as a social networking site (chat and Moments) and a news aggregator (public accounts).

On the other hand, though physically residing in Hong Kong, MCSs feel it is easier to retain their home culture while harder to assimilate to the local culture because of the increasingly strong presence of mainland Chinese people, organizations, and culture in Hong Kong. Before coming to Hong Kong, my undergraduate interviewees had already gotten in touch with organizations such as the Chinese Students & Scholars Association, which organizes orientation camps to introduce new students to the MCS community in Hong Kong. In this way, MCSs form circles of their own and reproduce it cohort by cohort. Through such

channels, senior MCSs impart information to incoming MCSs and respond to their questions. Instead of local news media, senior MCSs typically recommend new MCSs to follow WeChat public accounts such as "Hong Kong 365" to get updates about local issues, forming an information bubble on top of a social bubble.

In summary, MCSs' virtual social connection to the mainland has exposed them to the mainland Chinese information ecosystem. Their physical interaction with the secondary field of Hong Kong's local society, however, is usually filtered by an immediate field constructed by people and organizations with a strong mainland root. Instead of Hong Kong, Most MCSs live in *the field of mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong*, which not only maintains their habitual consumption of mainland Chinese media but also expands and renews their interests in such media.

### **Identification and the (Re)Negotiation of Media Habits**

#### ***Information Practices as an Identity Work***

MCSs are strongly attached to their home culture. Such cultural affinity makes them more willing to follow up with their incidental exposure to relevant information, as described by an interviewee:

One day, I saw a post saying "Weibo suddenly broke down," and another "My house collapsed." I researched a lot and finally found out they referred to the news of a celebrity's illegitimate child. It was very hard, you know? Every time, I sense the smell of hot topics [. . .] on WeChat Moments, and struggle to find out what happened, because they never post the full story. (Female, ambivalent, PhD student, spent 2.5 years in Hong Kong)

Despite the physical distance, many interviewees share a great interest in news from the mainland. Such enthusiasm stems from their long-term immersion in the mainland Chinese culture. During the interviews, they mentioned trending hashtags on Weibo, invoked popular memes on TikTok, and frequently dropped buzzwords on the Chinese Internet. In addition to the identity as a Chinese netizen, niche identities such as Korean maniac, gamer, and ACG fan also tie MCSs to certain subculture communities in the mainland Chinese Internet sphere.

Identity's role in shaping information practices is more evident in cases where one adjusts his or her media diet to fit a shifted identity. A telling example comes from a gay interviewee who has been hating the Chinese government since the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television's definition of homosexuality as "abnormal sexual relationship" in 2017. "Therefore, I decided to learn more about Hong Kong politics and blend into the local society" (Male, prodemocracy, PhD student, spent 1.5 years in Hong Kong), he said. After coming to Hong Kong, he subscribed to local media outlets and dated several locals until he met his boyfriend, a prodemocracy Hong Konger. His resentment against the Chinese government makes him eager to assume an identity as a Hong Konger by deliberately reaching out to local media and local people.

Political selective exposure may serve as an alternative explanation for the interviewee's change. However, other cases demonstrate that one can be antiregime and prodemocracy yet retain a firm Chinese identity without much engagement in Hong Kong's culture and politics. Consider the following quote:

In fact, my attention to Hong Kong [. . .] is not as much as that to the mainland. [. . .] I believe a reform in the mainland is the prerequisite for Hong Kong's development and progression. [. . .] In addition, I am from the mainland. Therefore, I care more about the mainland. (Male, prodemocracy, PhD student, spent one year in Hong Kong)

This quote vividly captures the interviewee's cultural identity and his understanding of the Hong Kong-China relationship. The narrative sounds objective, especially when Hong Kong's freedom and democracy are being ripped apart by the NSL. However, if efficacy were the interviewee's main concern, he would not have paid much attention to ordinary netizens' discussion about China's politics, as such discussion barely affects institutional politics. On the other side of the coin, a Hong Konger would follow local cultural and political trends even if Hong Kong's political system is tightly tied to decisions made in the mainland. Fundamentally, one's issue priority is a manifestation of their standpoint or identity. Identifying himself as a liberal Chinese, the above-mentioned interviewee actively uses information resources in Hong Kong to explore topics such as the Chinese government's persecution of dissidents and China-U.S. relations.

To conclude, MCSs' identification with the mainstream culture inside China's GFW spurs them to (often *unconsciously*) keep in touch with news from that cultural sphere. Even some prodemocracy MCSs care about their homeland in an antiregime way, unbeknown to themselves—because of deep-rooted cultural identification. Meanwhile, some prodemocracy MCSs' active reform of their information practices further demonstrate that information practices constitute an identity work—individuals decide what to read based on their understanding of who they are.

### ***Selective Exposure and Ritualistic Deliberation***

In line with Dvir-Gvirsman's (2019) research, only politically engaged interviewees select sources based on political leanings. Apolitical interviewees' political exposure is mostly incidental. Politically engaged participants do consume proattitudinal sources, but they also deliberately reach out to the other side. For example, an interviewee used to care little about politics and subscribed to no political channels. Once he became concerned by politics, however, he started to follow both proregime official media and antiregime opinion leaders. Though more convinced by the latter, he still regards the former as a window to learn the Chinese government's intentions and future directions. Also, consider this quote from another prodemocracy interviewee who often follows political controversies on mainland Chinese social media.

I think people who comment on Zhihu are those who sit on the right chair (a satirical reference to "where one stands depends on where one sits"; "on the right seat" means "in line with the regime"). They are different from us who sit improperly. [. . .] I just want to know how those sitting on the right chair rebut opinions from the so-called foreign forces. (Male, prodemocracy, master's student, spent one year in Hong Kong)

Although prodemocracy MCSs are straightforward that they use mainland Chinese sources for the strategic purpose of “knowing the enemy” or just for curiosity and fun, proregime MCSs typically stress the function of overseas media in their deliberation process. Consider the following quote from an interviewee:

In China there is only one voice. [. . .] Thus, I will read foreign media as a reference since they are not complete nonsense. [. . .] Many issues have two sides. If you only read the so-called ‘positive energy’ stuff, you will lose your critical ability as time goes by. (Male, proregime, undergraduate student, spent three years in Hong Kong)

The interviewee’s consumption of foreign media, however, often ends up confirming, instead of challenging, his proregime attitude. In fact, all interviewees have at least once searched the June 4 incident after circumventing the GFW. Yet few have changed their political stances as a result. Their deliberation about the incident reflects two prevailing discourses implanted by the Chinese authorities, namely whataboutism and pragmatism. Those who engage in whataboutism downplay the government’s deeds and focus instead on denying actions taken by students in 1989 or criticizing some survivors for posting right-wing conspiracy theories on western social media. Pragmatists acknowledge the government’s fault yet stress the priority of social stability and economic development over freedom and democracy. Whataboutism and pragmatism are also widely invoked in MCSs’ deliberation about current affairs such as Hong Kong’s social movement and China’s Internet censorship. Two representative quotes are listed below:

[Whataboutism] My feeling (about Chinese and overseas media’s news reports and opinion pieces on Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Bill Movement) is that we are both villains. So do not look down upon each other. Do not say you are better than me. (Male, proregime, PhD student, spent four years in Hong Kong)

[Pragmatism] Freedom of expression is important. But to maintain stability, the government will need to control or mute the voices of some communities. From a purely *quid pro quo* perspective, for a giant state apparatus, the benefit of trading freedom of expression for stability outweighs the cost. (Male, proregime, undergraduate student, spent three years in Hong Kong)

Both whataboutism and pragmatism are discursive gateways for the ruling authority to evade moral responsibilities of respecting and protecting human rights. Having internalized such discourses, proregime MCSs’ “comparative reading” of official and overseas media is oftentimes ritualistic as they are already mentally prepared to counterargue what the overseas media have to say. Over time, ritualistic deliberation itself becomes a habitual process performed when one encounters controversial political topics.

### ***Inoculation From the Other Side and the Power of Doubt***

If the Chinese government manages to inoculate citizens against regime criticism, how have liberal MCSs become prodemocracy in the first place? Despite their different political trajectories, a commonality among my prodemocracy interviewees is exposure to the early Chinese Internet. As demonstrated by Guo

(2020), the Chinese Internet used to be a much freer information sphere accommodating performative resistance to the political hegemony. An interviewee also laments the change at length:

In the beginning, the censorship on Weibo was coarse. Someone posted a screenshot from *the Empresses in the Palace* where the protagonist said, "I would become a vegan." The unsaid half was "if only the emperor [implying Xi] could die earlier." This meme was popular on Weibo. Everyone knew its implication, yet Weibo did not "harmonize" it. Later, the Cyberspace Administration intruded into Weibo, making its censorship increasingly active. You could no longer post such pictures. Finally, what drove me away completely was the insertion of more and more KOLs and water armies into this platform. [. . .] They brainwash people and spread propaganda. (Male, prodemocracy, PhD student, spent two years in Hong Kong).

The early Chinese Internet's role in evoking people's political awareness and regime doubt is also documented by Wu (2018) in her study of Bullog (a forum launched in 2006 and censored in 2009). Though my interviewees were too young to experience more deviant platforms like Bullog, some did witness the contraction of speech freedom on mainstream platforms like Weibo. Such experiences constitute a powerful antidote to the official propaganda. On the one hand, the once-liberal public sphere challenges the association of speech freedom with social instability and testifies to the arbitrariness of censorship. On the other hand, the fellow netizens my interviewees met online were mainland Chinese who criticized the government *with* them instead of "external forces" who criticized the government *for* them. The collective deliberation on the early Chinese Internet had transformed some of my interviewees while leaving others in doubt of the regime.

Since Xi's presidency in 2012, China has not only reinforced its censorship but also updated its propaganda strategies (Cai, 2021). Despite the tightened Internet control, liberal voices still exist inside the GFW, albeit hidden at the corners of niche websites. An example is Aisixiang (literal meaning: love thinking), a website where scholars from different fields post quasiacademic think-pieces. Featuring headlines such as "CCP's great practices in protecting human rights," the site is easily mistaken as a propaganda platform. However, an interviewee detailed how he navigates through the propaganda and obtains articles written by liberal scholars on Aisixiang. Mainstream platforms, however, are flooded by proregime opinions. Having grown up in a sanitized information environment, my younger interviewees are more accustomed to censorship and better inoculated against antiregime information.

### **Conclusion**

Borrowing Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, my research bridges literature on media habit, censorship, and acculturation to explain the continued use of censored sources among mainland Chinese students (MCSs) in Hong Kong. At the most basic level, habits (hexis) are quasiautomatic repeats of initially intentional actions calibrated for certain circumstances. Hexis works with ethos (values and predispositions) to reproduce habitus. Moreover, habits can be more complicated than a single behavior. An example is proregime MCSs' habitual political deliberation, a process of "exposure to a topic—consumption of media from both sides—acknowledging 'my side' while counterarguing the other side—reinforcement of existing

convictions." A convoluted process involving activation of both hexis and ethos for multiple times, such deliberation can still be repeatedly performed in a habitual way. At the upper level, habitus is in contact with immigrants' immediate field comprising their virtual connections to the home society and physical contact with a subset of the host society.

This generalized research approach connects microlevel automatic habits and purposive deliberation to mesolevel social network and macrolevel information structure and social culture. It is particularly suitable for analyzing immigrants. First, it draws attention to *the habitual nature of attitudes and behaviors*, a feature often omitted by observers who suppose that drastic contextual changes would lead to reorganization of immigrants' life. Second, the *hexis-ethos interaction* provides an apt framework to explore how behaviors and values immigrants internalized in their home societies reinforce each other and reproduce themselves in host societies. Finally, the differentiation of the *immediate and secondary fields* helps understand the unique sociocultural landscape faced by immigrants in host societies. To balance immigrants' information diets, one shall attend to not only the politics of press freedom and media plurality in home and host societies but also the micropolitics of human-machine interaction and interpersonal networks.

### ***Limitation and Future Direction***

Limited by the small sample size, the patterns and reasons of MCSs' media habits documented here may not be representative and need generalizable quantitative testing. The media diaries, though carefully designed, are still subject to weaknesses shared by self-recall methods, such as inaccuracy and social desirability effects.

Despite the limitations, the habituality of information consumption demonstrated in this research warrants more scholarly attention. While some politically engaged participants carefully select their political news sources, few participants are mindful of their nonpolitical information consumption. However, nonpolitical information is not free from political implications. It is especially true for MCSs whose home-society media are heavily censored by political authorities. Continued consumption of such sources hinders political awareness and distorts political views, not only posing obstacles to intergroup reconciliation between MCSs and Hong Kongers but also affecting MCSs' ability to make informed personal decisions about migration, investment, and even vaccination in the contemporary hyperpoliticized society. How much political awareness one should have while browsing nonpolitical information, and how such awareness can be raised are important questions worthy of further contemplation.

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**Appendix 1. Informants’ Profile & Notes About Demographic Features.**

<i>Informants’ profile</i>			
<i>Age</i>	<i>19–22</i>	<i>23–26</i>	<i>27–31</i>
	5	6	6
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
	7	10	
<i>Education</i>	<i>Bachelor’s</i>	<i>Master’s</i>	<i>Doctorate</i>
	6	5	6
<i>Years Spent in Hong Kong</i>	<i>1–2</i>	<i>3–4</i>	<i>5–6</i>
	10	4	3
<i>General Political Orientations</i>	<i>Prodemocracy</i>	<i>Ambivalent</i>	<i>Proregime</i>
	6	5	6

### Manifestations of Demographic Features in Findings

The contingencies introduced by these factors are sporadically discussed throughout the findings. For example, different programs constitute different fields with different mainland Chinese to local student ratios, providing favorable or unfavorable conditions for the reproduction of premigration media habits. Sexual orientation may factor in individuals' cultural identification and further influence their political orientation, while age is relevant to the presence or absence of exposure to the early Chinese Internet, and so on. However, instead of these dazzling individual differences, the study concerns more about the basic mechanism underlying the reproduction and renegotiation of immigrants' media habits—from the microlevel automatic habits and attitude-behavior interactions to the mesolevel influence of social networks on their inhabitants, as well as the conditioning effect of macrolevel information structures and sociocultural backgrounds. These basic mechanisms are generalizable across all demographic groups.

#### *Appendix 2. Frequency Table of Information Sources Mentioned in Media Diaries.*

<b>Information sources</b>	<b>Mentions</b>	<b>Mentioned by</b>
WeChat Moments	141	14
Online Discussion	101	17
Bilibili	88	14
WeChat Public Accounts	80	14
Offline Discussion	75	16
YouTube	70	13
Weibo	61	8
Games	53	8
Douban	35	5
Twitter	34	6
Initium Media	32	5
Red	30	3
Zhihu	29	6
HK01	29	5
Facebook	25	7
Instagram	21	7
BBC	21	5
NYT	20	4
The Paper	13	1
Gamersky	12	1
Bloomberg	10	1
Now News	10	1
Netflix	9	1
Google News	7	2
CCTV	7	4
Clubhouse	7	2
LinkedIn	7	4
TikTok	7	5

NextDraft	6	1
RTHK	6	3
Caixin	6	1
SCMP	6	3
I Can I BB	5	2
Litchi Tutorials	4	1
Telegram	4	1
Hong Kong Government News	4	2
Team COCO	4	1
Stand News	3	2
Financial Times	3	2
Podcast	3	3
QQ Zone	3	3
Suddenly, A Knock On the Door	3	2
Aisixiang	3	1
CNN	3	2
Hong Kong Media Law	2	1
Xi Jinping on Politics	2	1
Apple Daily	2	2
Ming Pao	2	2
Reuters	2	2
Hong Kong Economic Journal	2	2
Our World in Data	2	1
Yahoo News	2	1
AEON Magazine	2	1
Researchgate	2	1
Empowered	2	1
WeRead	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1186</b>	<b>17</b>

*Note.* "Mentions" refer to the frequency an information source was mentioned in all media diaries. "Mentioned by" denotes the number of unique participants that mentioned a source in their diaries.

In general, only platform-level sources are listed in the frequency table. "WeChat Moments" and "WeChat Public Accounts" are listed separately because of their differentiated content focuses and feeding mechanisms.