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# Online repression and transnational social movements: Thailand and the #MilkTeaAlliance

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the formation of transnational social movements primarily view these as either exile support of a local movement or mobilization around an international issue. This article presents a different argument for transnational activism drawing on the logic of the repression-dissent nexus when considering the combination of online and offline performances of contemporary social movements. The starting point is that membership in online communities constitutes a social identity for potential protest participants that can be activated and politicized when states' seek to repress access and content to online interaction. Since online communities are borderless by nature, we suggest that when regimes employ online repression due to local protests then we will see a backlash that will facilitate the formation of a transnational social movement. We illustrate our argument with an empirical discussion about how the anti-government protests in Thailand in 2020 became part of and facilitated a growing transnational social movement of youth discontent with regimes in Southeast and East Asia. The example shows that the impetus for increasing transnational co-operation throughout the process was in response to growing repression by the Thai authorities both of online content and on the street.

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## Introduction

Despite COVID-19-related and other restrictions on public gatherings, recent years have seen a surge of popular protest movements across Southeast Asia, including in Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines. There were notable similarities across these different mobilizations in the form of tactics, shared symbolism (often drawn from popular culture), and the use of pan-regional monikers such as the #MilkTeaAlliance. However, in contrast to previous instances of social movements drawing inspiration and learning from, or adopting symbols from each other (Bevin 2023; Gerbaudo 2015), this activism bears the hallmarks of a regional transnational social movement rather than separate local protests (Dedman and Lai 2021; Schaffar and Praphakorn 2021). Activists in Hong Kong and Thailand 'swapped messages' of criticizing the respective regimes to

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avoid censorship, and international donations covered the costs of protective gear for protestors, court cases, bails, and legal assistance (Barron 2020; Rawnsley 2021). Since transnational social movements typically constitute durable, capable, and legitimate challengers (Maiba 2005), these developments may have far-reaching consequences. It may make it more difficult for authoritarian regimes such as China, Thailand, and Myanmar to monitor or co-opt movement leaders, increasing the likelihood of more protests in the future.

Scholars typically define transnational social movements as cross-border collaboration and mobilization around a transnational issue, or a means to attract international attention to protests in one specific state (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Smith 2013). The #MilkTeaAlliance is a different phenomenon consisting of transnational mobilization processes in the intersection between online and offline behaviour that carry an implicit rather than explicit expectation of inter-movement reciprocity. What is new in this situation is that social media and modern communication technology contribute substance to the construction of the transnational movement rather than constitute an arena for information distribution. We suggest that online activity can serve as the basis for the development of a shared identity, while threats to online access in the form of state repression will activate this identity and motivate transnational support for social movements. Further, since even authoritarian states have fewer regulations for posting content critical of *another* government, reciprocal online activism across movements may be less risky for participants (Earl, Maher, and Pan 2022; Vie 2014).

A crucial aspect of social mobilization is the emergence of perceived shared identity among participants for a movement to expand and – in this case – develop transnational appeal (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Every individual has multiple perceived identities that can be the source for mobilization, including economic status, ethnic background, gender, political preferences, as well as other lifestyle decisions including the online identity that holds equal importance as the physical for contemporary youth (D'Ambrosi and Massoli 2012; Milan 2015). The shared habit of performing, communicating, and participating in an online environment is in itself a source of shared transnational identity, which we contend becomes relevant when such behaviour seems to be under threat. Thus, state attempts to repress the online manifestation of local protests may attract international attention and facilitate the formation of a transnational social movement featuring participants from countries concerned that similar repression may eventually also extend to them.

In this article, we present an explorative case study of the transnational nature of the protest movement in Thailand 2020 and the establishment of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag on Twitter. Explorative case studies are useful for theory development by identifying puzzles that previously have received limited attention and identifying a conceptualization of the cases (Ragin 2004). Exploratory case studies also highlight the importance of contexts and intervening factors to gauge plausible causal pathways (George and Bennett 2005). A specific advantage of our case selection is that Thailand during recent decades had several large-scale domestic mobilizations that have not evolved into transnational movements, making the recent developments somewhat unexpected (Dedman and Lai 2021).

This article begins by outlining the conventional understanding of protest diffusion and the formation of transitional social movements. We then discuss how the growing

amalgamation of online and offline activism provides a setting where new shared identities can emerge without geographical constraints and argue that threats to free online communication may constitute a factor that by itself encourages mobilization. This is followed by an exploration of this process focusing on how Thai protests in 2020 became part of a growing transnational social movement in Southeast Asia that transcends specific issues, linguistic barriers, and attempts by states to repress the phenomenon. The concluding section consists of a critical discussion of the case and how this paper indicates future research challenges for scholarship on the diffusion of political activism and state repression in an increasingly interconnected online world.

## Protest diffusion and transnational social movements

Transnational social movements can be described as networks simultaneously containing actors organized at the local, national, and international levels (Smith 2013). Distinctions can be made between transnational social movements centred on the aim of producing a change in one specific location, those focused on transnational issues, and those that function as networks for a variety of activists with different but interrelated specific local aims. The first type is made of transnational advocacy networks where protests in one location are supported by actors in other countries trying to influence the international community to pressure the repressive government to change behaviour towards protesters (Keck and Sikkink 1999). The second type refers to movements organized around transnational issues such as climate change or decisions made by international or regional governmental organizations such as the World Trade Organization (Maiba 2005). The third type of network is where the transnational factor consists of the establishment of links, communication, and support between what essentially remain different movements with primarily local aims. These types of movements are often linked by a shared issue such as for example the promotion of women's or LGBT rights in different countries, with successful experiences by activists in one country inform and support movements elsewhere (Gonsalves 2020; Rupp 1997).

There are several similarities between the logic of protest diffusion and the initial steps of the emergence of a transnational social movement. Scholars have identified numerous different pathways for protest diffusion, including both intentional and accidental. To begin with, diffusion is in general more likely within the proximate geographic region across countries with similar history, culture, language, and political and economic treaties (Strang and Soule 1998). The first potential pathway for diffusion is inspiration effects where an initial mobilization is observed by other actors who subsequently launch a spin-off movement (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). While successful protests at the outset are expected to provide the greatest inspiration, even failed movements provide observers with information about organizational shortcomings and may draw on those lessons for their own purposes. The second pathway is formed by direct contact between activists across movements, offering training, advice, and resources to the mobilization effort. Both inspiration and learning is more easily achieved if the different protest movements share language or can build on pre-existing historical ties among key opposition figures. These features have for example been identified in several high-profile instances of protest diffusion, including the Color Revolutions across post-Soviet

Eurasia in the early 2000s (Mitchell 2012) or the 2011–2012 Arab Spring (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015).

However, in order for these initial contacts to become an integrated transnational movement, participants in the included different countries must develop a collective identity. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) emphasize the ‘attribution of similarity’ as the crucial factor between local action and an expansion of the scale of protests, and this feature is central also for how country-specific movements scale up to the transnational level. By establishing communication among people from different regions and cultures, feelings of mutual trust and understanding can be developed (Smith 2013). Emerging webs of interpersonal and interorganizational connections enlarge the spread of information to actors within the movement. As a result, individuals – sharing a collective identity and aim – are mobilized beyond the traditional nation-state borders and transnational social movements have a significant impact on the national as well as international political processes (Smith 2013).

### **Online mobilization, repression, and collective identity formation**

Whereas the processes of protest diffusion and formation of transnational activist coalitions have been largely similar over the centuries (Anderson 2005), the global spread of internet communication and social media have made it both faster and easier. This has provided social movements access to online platforms to distribute information about their aims, to facilitate offline actions, as well as to organize online campaigns (Earl and Kimport 2011; Shelley 2001). As more information can be distributed directly from the protests, this facilitates diffusion in the form of possible inspiration effects, and it may also encourage transnational support for campaigns (Sökefeld 2006). Further, online communication simplifies the process of cross-movement learning through ‘specifically designed web pages for the diffusion of ideas and tactical approaches, to list servers, to chat rooms for activists, to internet media such as live streaming of radio and video’ (Maiba 2005, 46). Beyond the diffusion of protest tactics, both observational and direct learning from previous movements also influences how activism is ‘framed’ (Miller 2004; Oliver and Myers 2003).

Contemporary research also makes the argument that online presence and interactions constitute a new arena for the forging of collective identities, which may indicate an additional pathway to the emergence of transnational social movements (Milan 2015). Protests that occur both on the streets and online – often simultaneously – facilitate the formation of collective identity among participants. It makes it possible for each individual to highlight his or her agency and contribution to the movement by posting information about what is happening in real time on social media (Ellison and Boyd 2013). Further, these posts often directly and openly promote links to other participants in the movement by the use of tags, citations, and mentions while these links can be reinforced by likes, shares, and comments. Taken together, this strengthens the collective perception of ‘us/them’-narratives and stretch the duration of mobilization and interaction beyond the specific occasion of the event (Bennett and Segerberg 2015; Milan 2015).

What also needs to be considered is that the online iteration of protest-related interactions is not just an arena for reliving and repeating the on the street event, but also a networked community by itself. The virtual world constitutes a potential community

that can be activated for mobilization just like other cultural, ethnic, religious, or ideological identity markers that may transcend borders (Rucht 2007). This is, particularly, the case for youth that have never experienced life without the constant possibility of interacting with peers either online or offline (Grabher et al. 2018; Tilleczek and Srigley 2016). Besides being an ever-present option, access to sharing, performing, and receiving content within this online community constitutes an intrinsic part of individuals' identity. As identity is constructed through repeated interactions with others, it is likely that the removal of the opportunity of online interactions will be viewed by individuals as a threat towards this community and provide the motivation for emerging transnational activism.

What we are suggesting is that repression of the processes that construct, maintain, and strengthen online communities – i.e. the opportunity to interact – may facilitate the forming of transnational social movements. It is the perceived shared threat of being targeted by repression that in itself will construct a sufficiently strong collective identity that individuals will accept potential costs and mobilize for collective action. This is how repression of protests has been found to sometimes function – although rarely studied online – in accordance with the logic of so-called political jujutsu. This constitutes situations when repression fails to achieve its aim of punishing dissenters and deterring future protest participation (Davenport et al. 2019) and instead incentivizes mobilization and strengthens the social movement. This can occur because violent repression violates social norms meaning that participants and bystanders become increasingly averse to living under a regime prepared to attack unarmed protesters and become more committed to collective action (Francisco 2004). Besides providing additional motivation for further mobilization, repression may also create within-regime discord, and it can convince third parties to support the protesters (Sharp 1989). All these factors increase the likelihood of both a sustained protest movement and increase the likelihood of its eventual success (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

As states have become increasingly active in repressing online access when faced with offline protests (Keremoglu and Weidmann 2020), we suggest that a side-effect of such practices may contribute to the emergence of transnational activism. The logic is similar to political jujutsu but with a more dispersed audience than just citizens in the immediate vicinity of the suppressed protests. Considering the technology that connects online communities is transnational by nature, the actual effect of the repression used by regimes may directly impede and affect individuals beyond the borders of the state itself. This creates two possible mechanisms that can facilitate the formation of a shared collective action. Either directly as a reaction to repression affecting the format and content of the online community an individual belongs to or indirectly if it creates a perception that regimes are similar in their actions and therefore constitute a shared enemy. When individuals observe that access to the global online community is being restricted for some members of this network due to state repression, this can be interpreted as indicative that their own government may use similar policies. Consistent with theories about how collective identity is formed (Tarrow 2011), both can contribute to increased interest and feelings of sympathy towards the repressed movement and resentment towards the repressive regime. Our argument thus primarily focuses on how repression of online communities can create collective identity, but it may also be that off-line repression (with information shared online) against members of these communities have similar effects. The formation of transnational collective identity then leads to more direct and hands-

on support for protest participants, which in turn further reaffirms the off-line dimension of on-line communities (Bamert, Gilardi, and Wasserfallen 2015).

### **Thailand and the #MilkTeaAlliance as an exploratory case**

To explore our argument about state repression of online communities and social movements, we choose the case of Thailand and the process of a protest campaign seemingly becoming a transnational collaborative East Asian network of anti-government activism. Case studies can be defined as 'detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events' (George and Bennett 2005, 17). We employ an exploratory approach for two reasons. First, rather than claiming its representativeness, we use the Thai case to probe a plausible relationship between online repression and transnational mobilization (Gerring 2004; Levy 2008). Explorative case studies are useful for theory development by identifying puzzles that previously have received limited attention and identifying a conceptualization of the cases (Ragin 2004). Exploratory case studies also highlight the importance of contexts and intervening factors to gauge plausible causal pathways (George and Bennett 2005). The case of Thailand demonstrates two important conditions for the online repression-transnational collective identity formation nexus to occur: widespread prior access to transnational online networks, and a history of public protests. Other cases without these conditions possibly have a different pathway than Thailand and Southeast Asia.

#### ***Two scope conditions***

The first scope condition is that potential participants already prior to protests have access to and are active in transnational online communities. Thailand and Southeast Asia constitute a suitable setting for several reasons. The region is one of the most social media active regions in the world with internet access is almost exclusively via smartphones (Sinpeng and Tapsell 2021). Thailand had an internet user penetration of 79% in 2021 (Statista 2022) and it was estimated that 97.3% of youth in the country are active on social media platforms, such as Line, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram (Statista 2021a). Most of the users access these services using smartphones, with 79% penetration rate in the country 2021 (Statista 2021b). Online socialization is facilitated by the modern infrastructure in urban areas, with the Thai internet speed of 225.17 surpassing many European countries, including for example Germany (136.66) and Sweden (174.9) (WPR 2022). The motivation for such substantial investment in this type of infrastructure is its importance for attracting and retaining international businesses that contribute greatly to the Thai economy (Meijers 2014; Palasri, Huter, and Wenzel 1999). This also means that any shutdown of online access will be partial and/or temporal, as more indefinite measures would affect businesses and the tourism industry and subsequently the overall economic development.

The second scope condition emphasizes the history of public mobilization in the country as this provides would-be activists with a basic knowledge of repertoires of action and potential state responses. Youth activism, and in particular involving students, are in Thailand both a feature of events with historical-symbolic importance, but also a

prominent feature during the past decades. Student activism was crucial in every successful pro-democracy movement in Thailand including the constitutional change in 1932 and the overthrows of military rule 1973 and 1992, but it is also constantly highlighted as part of the trauma from the government massacre of students at Thammasat University campus in Bangkok in 1976 (Kongkirati 2012; Ungpakorn 2006). In addition, student groups were active in protests both by the ‘red shirts’ (emphasizing majority-style democracy) and the ‘yellow shirts’ (preserving a role for the monarch in the political order) during repeated mass demonstrations 2005–2014 (Hewison 2014; Jernsittiparsert and Kitipatmontree 2017). It is worth emphasizing, though, that although these previous examples of student mobilization provide a backdrop to the events our study covers in 2020, the latter campaign was neither organized nor to a large extent composed of veteran activists. There are also no reports that the transnational nature of the 2020 movement could have been facilitated by pre-existing networks of activists. On the contrary, when the Hong Kong-activist leader Joshua Wong in 2016–2017 tried to build a transnational Southeast Asian movement, he failed to attract Thai involvement (Dedman and Lai 2021).

## **Thailand and the Southeast Asian transnational social movement**

During 2020, there were around 700 primarily peaceful protests events in Thailand, with the major ones attracting between 20,000 and 100,000 participants (Sombatpoonsiri and Kri-aksorn 2021). Our focus is on the protest movement that began in February 2020, both on- and off-line, and the subsequent dynamics of repression and mobilization that connected this Thai-specific mobilization to activists across the region. This transnational social movement have both by commentators and activists’ themselves at times been referred to as the #MilkTeaAlliance, but the phenomenon we discuss extends beyond that specific catchphrase. The participants in the 2020 demonstrations consisted primarily of high school and university students (Farrelly 2021; McCargo 2021) who spend a substantial amount of daily time on social media platforms (CTN News 2020; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2020; Kurzydowski 2021; Statista 2021a).

### ***The initial wave of protest***

The immediate trigger for protests in Thailand was a ruling by the Constitutional Court in February 2020 that forced the relatively new Future Forward Party (FFP) to disband because a loan provided to the party by its leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, was deemed illegal (Tan 2020). This ruling was perceived as part of a series of efforts by the establishment to maintain de facto military rule in the country, and curtailing efforts of political change. In Thailand, the military leadership has maintained substantial political influence for decades both behind the scenes through contacts with the King, economic elites, and political leaders but also through occasional direct rule. Since the abolishment of absolute monarchy in 1932, there have been more than 20 successful or failed coup d’état in the country, including the latest ones in 2006 and 2014 (Farrelly 2013). The Future Forward Party was formed 2018 to contend the elections in 2019 where a civilian regime would take over from the 2014–2019 military rule of General Prayuth Chan-o-Cha. Prior to this transition, though, the Constitution was revised with

the provision that a third of Parliamentarians (the Upper House) are appointed by the military (Wongcha-um and Kuhakan 2019). These appointees together with representatives from pro-military parties supported General Prayuth to continue as Prime Minister after the new Parliament convened, despite opposition against this from both the largest (Pheu Tai) and third largest (Future Forward) parties (Suhartono and Ramzy 2019).

One of the reasons for Future Forward's success at the polls was its' ability to connect with and receive support from young voters (Sinpeng 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). This was both a consequence of the party being seen as different from pre-existing elites and a skillful use of social media to spread its' political message. This connection meant that mobilization among the youth began already when accusations were made against the party and Thanathorn and the case was being presented to the Constitutional Court. Members of different university clubs in Bangkok and regional campuses created the advocacy group 'Free Youth' that launched an online campaign on Twitter. Its Hashtag #saveFFP (#saveอนาคตใหม่) became the first hashtag in Thailand reaching more than three million tweets (Sinpeng 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). Although this specific expression circulated predominantly among young people, the impact of the campaign beyond these groups alerted the traditional political elites about the widespread political discontent that existed in the country. Furthermore, the Thai authorities had experience in dealing with online activism, as it during recent years increasingly have monitored, harassed, and prosecuted individuals for expressing their opinions about the regime on social media (Amnesty 2020). This has been done through a legalistic framework outlawing criticism of the king, but also under the guise of clamping down on 'fake news'.

After the judgment in February 2020 that the Future Forward had to dissolve, online protests started to become accompanied by street protests which was seen by the regime as a greater threat. During this first wave of demonstrations, the protests were still predominantly a Thai-specific affair with mainly student participants (at first from Thammasat, Chiang Mai, and Naresuan universities, but later others including high schools) with distinctly local mobilization dynamics (McCargo 2021). However, the protests consisted of flash mobs with the time and place announced on social media, and, crucially, often live-streamed or published online giving the movement a wider audience both in Thailand and beyond. This included the use of the twitter hashtag #WhatsHappeningInThailand and the Facebook group 'Royalist Marketplace' with the latter eventually reaching more than 1 million members (Thomas, Beattie, and Zhang 2020). The students also designed the content of protests carefully to avoid legal repercussions, disguising overt criticism of the authorities by embedding it in references to cartoons, memes, and other popular culture expressions. Throughout the protests, the three-finger salute signalling resistance to the oppressing regime in the movie *The Hunger Games* was used on the streets and further broadcast to the wider movement in the form of selfies posted on social media (Andini and Akhni 2021). A side effect of these tactics were, however, also a creation of a shared identity between protesters and online bystanders centred on the recognition (or not) of these cultural references. The response from the authorities was the implementation of an emergency decree banning public gatherings justified as a measure to address the COVID-19 situation (Tan 2020). This was accompanied by a warning from General Prayuth that 'abuse of social media' would be prosecuted (Amnesty 2020).

### ***Enter the #MilkTeaAlliance***

The repression implemented by the authorities ended the street protests, but the perception that such measures were unjust and undemocratic fuelled a continuation of online mobilization (Tan 2020). During the lockdown, this sense of frustration and the increasing amount of time spent online may have contributed to the birth of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag. After the girlfriend of Thai television actor Vachirawit Chiva-aree made an Instagram post that implicitly indicated that China and Taiwan are different countries, there were 1.4 million posts on Chinese Weibo demanding an apology from the actor (Wang and Rauchfleisch 2021). This led to an angry response by Thai fans of Vachirawit, and it also quickly engaged activists from Taiwan and Hong Kong. A Facebook post in mid-April that depicted Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese individuals toasting with their respective popular forms of milk tea became viral and coined the hashtag. The movement was, however, focused on resistance to China as the first Thai #MilkTeaAlliance campaign was criticism of the Chinese plans of building a series of dams on the upper Mekong river which would have negative consequences on downstream communities including in Thailand (Schaffar and Praphakorn 2021). An analysis of both the temporal trend and the content for the use of the #MilkTeaAlliance on twitter reveals that the term featured prominently for a few weeks in April and then reappeared in July. Interestingly, during the first phase, it alluded to anti-Chinese opinion while it returned with connotations of support for pro-democracy activists and especially in Thailand (Wang and Rauchfleisch 2021).

### ***Protests with a transnational dimension***

A new wave of protests erupted in Thailand in June when the COVID-19 situation had improved. The event that provoked these protests further highlighted the transnational nature of Southeast Asian social movements. The Thai democracy and human rights activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit, known as 'Tar', was abducted in Cambodia while on the phone with his sister on 4 June 2020. Wanchalearm lived in exile since the 2014 military coup to avoid punishment for his engagement for gender and LGBT rights and democratization (Wright and Praithongyaem 2020). Leaving the country did not reduce his activism and he gathered an online audience for his Facebook postings making fun of the junta, leading the Thai authorities to issue an arrest warrant in 2018 for inciting unrest. Immediately after the disappearance, the hashtag #SaveWanchalearm trended on Twitter, and Thai security forces were accused of having organized his capture even though they denied such involvement (Tan 2020). This event also reverberated within online activists networks as he was the ninth exiled critic of the Thai government disappeared in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam since 2014 (Wright and Praithongyaem 2020). Further, the reporting of both the abduction and the protests organized against it often emphasized the regional pattern of enforced disappearances of pro-democracy and human rights activists with several hundred such cases reported annually in ASEAN (Nortajuddin 2020).

Demonstrations increased in size in July and the demands by protesters' became broader and increasingly more outspoken critique of the regime. Both online and as part of the street protests, the #MilkTeaAlliance moniker was often used as hashtag and on banners, and occasionally accompanied by calls for a 'Free Hong Kong'

(McCargo 2021). In August, the student leader Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul presented ten demands specifying political reforms for a return of full democracy in front of a massive crowd in front of Thammasat University in Bangkok (BBC 2020). The main grievances centred on constitutional reforms to limit the power of the military and the role of the King, and an end to the repression of peaceful protests. Although the King in Thailand have relatively limited formal powers, the criticism focused both on how the military-monarchy alliance undermined the Thai democratic process and discontent about King Vajiralongkorn's decision to relocate to a luxury hotel in Germany during the COVID-19 crisis (FH 2022; Kirschbaum 2020). While King Vajiralongkorn is less popular than his predecessor King Bhumibol, who passed in 2016, criticism of the Thai monarchy is both rare and illegal, meaning that the calls to remove the King's legal immunity and investigate its' privately owned assets were highly contentious moves (Culbertson and Thompson 2020; Phaholtap and Streckfuss 2020).

The government responded by increasing repression both online and towards civil society and protesters (Sombatpoonsiri 2021). Besides stepping up disinformation campaigns to discredit the opposition, including the creation of tens of thousands of fake Twitter and Free Messenger accounts, the government increased its use of digital surveillance, mass arrests, and lawsuits against social media content and platforms to limit freedom of expression (Thomas, Beattie, and Zhang 2020). Prime Minister Prayuth ordered the authorities to utilize 'all laws and articles' against protesters and reintroduced prosecutions of anyone insulting, defaming, or threatening the monarchy after a three-year hiatus (HRW 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). The Thai authorities sought to block over 2,200 websites and online accounts in September to stop the mobilization, and the police detained many pro-democracy activists and youth. By November, more than 500,000 pro-democracy social media posts were under investigation for possible criminal prosecution (Sombatpoonsiri 2021; Thomas, Beattie, and Zhang 2020).

The immediate response to repression, especially following the arrest of most of the major leaders that had been involved until mid-October, was that protests increased but became even more of a grassroots movement. To the extent that activist leaders continued to have a role, it was largely inspirational and off-site and 'encouraged every protester to be a 'core' protester and anyone to be a speaker' (Lertchoosakul 2021, 209). The adaptability of means was easy since the protests were organized by a variety of social movements within the greater campaign promoting a diverse set of agendas. Although everyone agreed with the over demands for new elections, a revised Constitution, and reforming the monarchy, these were accompanied by specific demands if the protest were organized by the LGBTQ+ community, environmental activists, feminists, farmers, students, or people with disabilities (Teeratanabodee 2023). Members of each of these different communities had also access to different online transnational connections, which influenced the potential of identifying collective identities.

Under the threat of increasingly violent police repression, the format of protests was continuously updated in creative ways that drew attention to the campaign while emphasizing that the youth were different from the existing political elites. When the government obstructed public squares with flower pots to prevent mass gatherings, their opposition sent invitations on social media platforms to the urban 'flower garden' where they collectively could shout indirect messages against their leaders (Sombatpoonsiri 2021). Harry Potter-themed protests sparked a vast attention in society while literally

avoiding any mention of the regime, by casting ‘spells’ against ‘You-Know-Who-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’, thus using the rhetoric about the villain Lord Voldemort in the popular books and movies (Phoborisut 2020). Similarly, protests in the form of pretending to be hamsters, inspired by the Japanese manga *Hamtaro* from 1997, running around public spaces is not an act that strictly violates the legal framework against public gatherings (Chachavalpongpun 2020).

The organizers themselves created specific themes for the protests, but the approach was inspired by the use of visual imagery and popular culture by Hong Kong protesters during the preceding year (Ismangil and Lee 2021). Other forms of strategic learning from protests elsewhere included bringing umbrellas to demonstrations as protection against police use of water cannons (Jha 2020). Further, inspired by the Hong Kong ‘Be Water’ tactic and awareness that authorities were monitoring social media account, the initial information about planned protest sites was often deliberately false with the accurate location posted only a few hours before it started (Bangkok Post 2020). Since activists continuously checked into social media, they could easily relocate using public transport while police vehicles would be stuck in traffic and arrive only after the sudden protest event already was over (Sombatpoonsiri and Kri-aksorn 2021).

Another source of support as well as means of communication was through the online K-pop (Korean popular music) community, which consists of at least 100 million fans all over the world. Outside of Korea, this community has its’ largest membership in Thailand and Indonesia (Andini and Akhni 2021). The ability of this community to influence political issues became apparent during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the US 2020, when the Korean biggest boyband BTS joined the demand for racial justice on twitter and helped raise several million dollars in contributions to the protest movement (Lee and Kao 2021). In Thailand, several celebrities ranging from beauty queens to artists and television personalities provided support to the pro-democracy movement both vocally and by donations of financial and material resources to the protesters (Bangkok Post 2021; ThaiPBS World 2021). However, when such celebrities also were detained as part of the government repression, there was an intense backlash online, which activated the global K-pop fanbase that set up charities to pay legal costs for celebrities and other activists (Andini and Akhni 2021; Thongnoi 2020). Such efforts developed a dynamic of its own, as K-pop fans of different celebrities competed over which fan-group provided the most financial donations (Bruner 2020). Such online spin-off effects helped maintain the political momentum of the protest movement, while also providing opportunities for a wider range of individuals to become active participants that launch initiatives and suffer costs, which in turn facilitates collective identity formation.

As repression increased in Thailand, a greater share of online (and occasionally offline) activism took on a transnational nature. Activists and students in Taipei and Hong Kong took to the streets to demonstrate in support of the Thai protesters. Further, online campaigns by Hong Kong activists have criticized the Thai monarchy while reciprocal efforts by Thai activists have focused on critique of the Chinese rule of Hong Kong, making it difficult for the respective governments to repress these claims (Barron 2020; Lau 2020).

### **Passing the #MilkTea forward**

After the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag began to appear in April 2020, it has been adopted by other actors than the original participants. Its original anti-Chinese stance contributed to its use on Indian social media following Sino-Indian border skirmishes, and to Australia following a diplomatic row over a World Health Organization inquest into the origins of COVID-19 (Schaffar and Praphakorn 2021). As a pro-democracy symbol, young Belorussian protesters against the Lukashenko regime used *Ryazhenka*, a traditional yogurt drink, as an indicator of the transnational nature of the anti-dictatorship protests (Chachaval-pongpun 2020).

The influence of the ideas behind the #MilkTeaAlliance in Southeast Asia seems, however, to be more than a symbolic moniker occasionally trending on social media and instead show how a transnational social movement can develop. This movement primarily connected grassroots protest participants with external grassroots supporters with elite input and elite audiences less visible. This contrasts with the nature of the protests across the region in 2014: the Sunflower movement in Taiwan, Occupy Central/Umbrella in Hong Kong, and anti-coup protests in Thailand, when protest elites largely designed and coordinated the spread of information (Au 2017; Chua 2017; Tin-Yuet Ting 2019). Although leaders from these earlier protest campaigns later met and discussed the establishment of a joint regional pro-democracy network (Dedman and Lai 2021; Phoborisut 2019), this collaboration had little role in 2020. There was also limited outreach in the form of engaging elites as audience for online communication during the 2020 Thai protests. An analysis of 154 million twitter posts about protests in Hong Kong 2019, Thailand 2020, and Myanmar 2021 found that the Thai protests were by far the least likely to draw a response by Western political elites (there were only 32 responding tweets of the Thai protests – less than 1,5% of the total) (Cheng, Lui, and Fu 2023).

While the Thai protest movement continued into 2021, the transnational and online involvement has spread across Southeast Asia beyond the initial #MilkTeaAlliance countries. Several twitter hashtags appeared mimicking those used by Thai activists, including #WhatIsHappeningInIndonesia, #IfLaosPoliticsWasGood and #WhatIsHappeningInPhilippines drawing attention to local political issues appeared in conjunction with the Thai protests (Chia 2020; Duangdee 2021). Arguably, the most substantial influence of this transnational social movement co-operation was how the Thai experience inspired, provided a blueprint, and supported the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar after the coup on 1 February 2021 (Egreteau 2022).

### **Concluding discussion**

As contemporary social movements increasingly combine street and online activities, it is not surprising that the roles and behaviour of both participants and observers differ from what previously was the norm. This has consequences not only on protest practices but should also influence second-order effects of protest such as expansion and diffusion including the emergence of transnational movements. We suggest that this factor is not only a new means of communication but that participation and exposure to online interaction constitute a new potential dimension which can form the basis for collective identity among segments of the population. In the study of the #MilkTeaAlliance in

Thailand that links up with social movements in primarily Taiwan and Hong Kong but also further afield, the affirmation of transnational collective identity has been a central feature both online and, eventually, also in offline activism.

What stands out as a key factor that facilitated these transnational links were experiences of being targeted for repression rather than the similarity of movement aims or the activation of established networks. The first mobilization in Thailand in February 2020 remained a largely local movement even if some tactical inspiration was visible from previous protests in Hong Kong, and the use of the Hunger Games three-fingered salute was prominent. In contrast, the inspiration for the #MilkTeaAlliance moniker was a Chinese campaign criticizing Thai celebrities for referring to independent Taiwan in March 2020, and such online influence campaigns are part of Beijing's pressure and repression toolbox (Wu 2020). The role of repression as motivation for increased transnational collaboration is even more visible when focusing on the protests during the second half of 2020. After the abduction of Thai activist Wanchalearm from his exile in Cambodia, it became clear that national borders might not contain the police authorities in Southeast Asia. This realization created an even greater perception that pro-human rights activists in the region are facing similar threats, which further encourages collective identity formation. By posting supportive messages, offering alternative sources for public dissemination of movement claims, and organizing fund-raising for detained Thai activists, the transnational community was soon also an active participant that shaped the strategies of further contention.

The use of repression served as a visible indicator of the similarities among the different regimes in the region in responding to challenges, even if they are ideologically and institutionally different. However, the forming of a transnational and shared identity was particularly facilitated by repression towards celebrities with a fanbase that already spanned across borders. Of course, the initial decision of celebrities to voice their support of protesters (making them at risk for repression) is in itself an effect of the importance of online opportunities for interaction between idols and fans in modern popular culture. Although such communities primarily are apolitical, they do contribute to the creation of shared identities meaning that repression of these idols – or even against prominent participants in the networks – can easily motivate political mobilization.

This highlights one of the scope conditions that we identified as necessary for the development of a collective identity, namely that participants and their potential online audience have regular interaction already prior to the protests and repression. Taking this factor into account should also influence to what extent we can expect to see similar trajectories beyond Southeast Asia and across regions. It is also worth considering some temporal and spatial contextual factors that may have contributed to the perception that online repression is targeting a transnational community, and the mobilization potential from these events. The first of these is that our case explores a protest movement occurring in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic where offline social life was restricted. Thus, as online communities became even more important for individuals' social interaction (Silveira, Morais, and Petrella 2022), it can be expected that the experiences of repression in this arena may have a greater mobilizing effect. The second is that activists had a shared enemy in the form of China. This factor – as well as sharing the language – facilitated collaboration between protesters in Taiwan and Hong Kong and, following the online campaign against the actor Vachirawit Chiva-

aree, this created an additional source for collective identity for Thai online activists. It is impossible to discount these contextual aspects in this analysis, but more research into whether the #MilkTeaAlliance persist in the future should be encouraged.

As democratic backsliding continues throughout Southeast Asia with ever-decreasing civil society space, the importance of the online arena will only continue to expand and attract participants and observers across state borders. What we have argued and shown in this article is that attempts of governments to repress online content may have different effects than traditional repression of civil society activism. Rather than deter participation or suppress the availability of information, attempts to target online activism may instead encourage support for the opposition and a wider distribution of their ideas and criticism. As repressive measures have the intent of suppressing rather than drawing attention to opposition figures, the Thai regime – or other regimes in the region and around the world – will have to reconsider how to deal with protest movements that combine online and offline presence.

This paper adds to recent studies that have identified that online repression may lead to a backlash and instead strengthen support for the opposition including in China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan (Hassanpour 2014; Huang 2017; Nabi 2014; Pan and Siegel 2020). Rather than exploring the effect among local protest participants and observers, we however expand the scope to explore the transnational consequences of repression. Most literature on protest diffusion or the formation of transnational movements has put less emphasis on the role of repression as state borders largely constrain the reach of states' security apparatus. When transnational repression occurs, it is often more covert and selective (Dukalskis et al. 2022; Glaisus 2023). Our exploration of how protests in Thailand became a transnational social movement in Southeast Asia suggest that researchers should consider the full repression-opposition nexus also at the transnational level. As membership in online communities becomes of ever-increasing importance as identity markers around the world, it is natural that these also can and will be increasingly the arena for political mobilization. When regimes try to restrict access to such communities or repress recognized members of transnational online networks, it may provoke resistance from activists both near and far.

While we do not claim that the case of Thailand and transnational activism in Southeast Asia is representative for the whole universe of cases, our study has probed an aspect of contemporary social movements that we believe warrants further attention. Future research can expand on both our theoretical argument about how online interaction provides a potential foundation for new collective identities and explore how this affects the spread and dynamics of social mobilization. Besides testing whether similar trajectories of transnational movement activism occur in other geographical regions, and under different political regimes, it can be relevant for the study of other forms of political mobilization as well. This includes processes that lead to violent conflict – whether communal, rebellion, or terrorism – as well as potential second-order effects of state repression in response to online transnational activism.

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