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Public Health Crises as a Chance to Reconstruct Social Identity

Taiwan and Hong Kong Government's Practices to Ensure Social Cohesion Through the Construction of Social Identities During COVID-19

Topic and Research Question

When lockdowns due to the outbreak of a novel coronavirus were initially implemented as a measure to combat its spread in early 2020, public communication was often associated with the notion that it was merely a matter of time before everything would return back to "normal". It turned out that COVID-19 was not a temporary phenomenon – it has remained a constant in human reality. Thus, it has also remained a constant in communication, more specifically in public government communication.

The research of this thesis focuses around analyzing how public communication by the governments of Taiwan and HKSAR respectively was designed and utilized to (re)construct relevant parts of the prominent social identities in the analyzed societies between early 2020 and mid-2021. The research thus followed the following research questions:

What are similarities and differences in the construction of social identity in public communication by both Taiwan and Hong Kong government during the COVID-19 public health crisis between 2019 and 2021? To what extent are these constructions aimed at (re)defining the relationship between the respective societies and the PRC?

The goal of asking and answering these questions is to get an insight into the structure and focus of the communicated self-perception of these societies. It is also to see where they differ, where they overlap and to contribute to the understanding what the self-understood and communicated relationship with the PRC looks like within these two societies.

State of the Art

The State of the Art is structured according to the key dynamics which must be taken into consideration. It thus answers three key questions: How is Social Identity created? Which dynamics exist within Social Identities? Which dynamics exist between Social Identities? And how is Social Identity influenced by public crises?

The first of which is largely answered by the established Social Identity Theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. It draws on the thought that individuals utilize social categorization to define their individual place in society. Part of these categories are connected to social aspects, thus constructing the social part of one's identity: social identity.

The literature review identifies three key dynamics to exist within social identities. **Social change** referencing the willingness and ability to second-guess one's own group membership and striving to improve through change, **group and norm consensus** relating to the need to establish common norms and understandings of group behavior and definition, and **leadership** describing the dynamic by which individuals become leaders.

Dynamics that exist between social identities are **competition and stigmatization** meaning the need for groups to compete among one another to ultimately achieve a positive self-image, **cooperation** referencing the ability of groups to work together in following a common goal or interest, and **mobilization** describing the use of social identity to mobilize social groups for a certain cause or end.

Lastly the literature outlines how social identity has in the past been analyzed in the context of public crises. In the context of health crises, it has been proven to be in relation to trends of health inequality, as well as influence individual threat perception and have a significant influence on how leaders behave and communicate during crises.

Methodology and Approach

Building on the State of the Art, the thesis develops an analytical framework aimed at identifying the most relevant aspects of social identity construction and utilization in public communication. The categories and criteria being as follows:

Category	Criteria
Creation	Naming
	Involvement
	Evaluation Out-Group
Definition	Norms
	Politization
	Threat
Differentiation	Dynamics
	Norms
	Fear or Cooperation
Utilization	Redefinition
	Mobilization

Through a qualitative content analysis of the selected materials, which were largely press statements,

speeches and other forms of official government communication of the respective governments, the application of these criteria to the four defined steps of constructing social identity was evaluated and analyzed.

Main Facts

In the case of both Taiwan and HKSAR, social identity was **created** on either a general or national level. Emotional involvement was achieved through highlighting things such as nationality, solidarity, and norms in the case of Taiwan and protection from external threats and alignment with the PRC in the case of HKSAR. Out-groups were evaluated according to their performance during COVID-19, their association with the PRC, Beijing or Xi Jinping as cooperative and aligned in the same interests or as threats to national security.

Twelve key norms which **define** Taiwanese social identity were identified, among them composure, fairness, strength and resilience, democracy and solidarity and selflessness. Ten norms were identified for HKSAR, among them determination and strength, dedication and commitment, resilience and endurance, safety, peace and stability and rules and freedoms. It was observed that Taiwanese political communicators politicize social identity especially through the mention of common challenges, in a large number of cases in the analyzed timeframe this refers to COVID-19, while those in HKSAR also rely on the relevance of national security to politicize. This is also mirrored in what is most often perceived as a threat to the national identity in both cases: COVID-19.

Differentiation from other out-groups is achieved by highlighting differences in norms such as democracy, composure and performance during COVID-19 in Taiwan and security, nationality and cooperation/trust in HKSAR.

In Taiwan, social identity is **utilized** to redefine the relationship with the PRC on the one hand and mobilize the social identity towards securing future and values on the other. In HKSAR redefinition occurs in relation to independence and mobilization in relation to COVID-19 and issues of national security.

Results

The analysis and discussion of the thesis yield seven key findings, which all serve as puzzle pieces to answering the posed research question:

One: COVID-19 impacts the construction of social identity in both of the researched cases across all categories and criteria. **Two:** Out-groups can occur as externalities; they can however also be part of an existing internal construct. **Three:** There are large overlaps in the norms used to define the respective social identities, the largest being in the perception of strength, resilience, solidarity and cooperation. **Four:** The cases differ largely in their definition of democracy and the value thereof to the constructed social identities. **Five:** In the case of Taiwan, what is perceived to be at risk by external threats is democracy, for HKSAR it is national security. **Six:** Alignment with the PRC is an option for Taiwan, yet an inherent strategy and practice for HKSAR. **Seven:** In both cases, social identity is (re)constructed with the aim of securing something else, such as a future, values, health and security.

The results clearly show that while there are similarities between the constructed social identities, largely related to cultural symmetries and the confrontation with the same threat, there are also differences. These relate largely to the self-understanding of these respective societies as independent, democratic and aligned with the PRC. Social identity thus serves a similar purpose, the same patterns and key categories apply no matter the contextual differences, yet its potential impact and effect on self- and group-perception differs.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Leah Schrimpf holds a Bachelor's in Political Science from the Free University Berlin. She conducted part of her studies at the National Taiwan University in Taipei and gained work experience in multinational companies, political parties and consultancies. She is currently a Senior Policy Advisor at Germany's largest association for the digital industry, Bitkom.



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