

Navigating Dividing Social Environments: The Civic Engagement Experience of Student Participants outside of Taipei in the 2014 Taiwan Sunflower Movement

Research Overview

Building on Freire's concepts of critical consciousness and dialogue as tools for societal transformation (Freire, 1970), this study explores how Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement shaped youth's civic engagement. Through interviews with then non-Taipei university students, we found that the Sunflower Movement and social media created opportunities for civic dialogue and transformation.

Purpose of Study

Given the increasing global division, civic education and movements are crucial for promoting democratic values. The 2014 Taiwan Sunflower Movement exemplified student power in addressing national concerns. The movement began as a resistance to a controversial agreement that opened bilateral service-industry flows between Taiwan and China. Following the ruling party's rapid, chaotic passage of the agreement, civilians occupied the national legislature for 24 days, leading the government to pause the agreement and awakening Taiwanese students' political awareness. While scholarship often focuses on movement leadership, the process of citizenship formation and civic engagement among college students is under-examined. Building

on a previous study of Taipei-based students (Authors, 2024),¹ this second phase examines how students outside the capital developed their citizenship and civic engagement.

This study focuses on Taiwanese college students in politically divided areas outside the Taipei metropolitan area. The guiding research question is: How do Taiwanese young adults attending universities outside Taipei perceive the influence of their surrounding social environments (family, school, and Internet exposure) on their beliefs and behaviors regarding civic engagement during the Sunflower Movement?

Research Methods

This qualitative study is based on 20 virtual interviews (1–1.5 hours) with young Taiwanese adults, exploring how family, school, and social backgrounds shaped their beliefs and behaviors regarding civic engagement. Participants shared artifacts to support data triangulation. Recruitment targeted students who attended universities outside the Taipei metropolitan area in 2014 via the project's social media pages. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an integrative, recursive data analysis process. We first used an inductive approach to identify initial themes, then refined the coding scheme through comparison and deductive analysis informed by the theoretical framework.

Results and Discussion

¹ Study 1 shows four key findings. First of all, most participants' families promoted one-sided dialogues where (grand)parents imparted their own socio-political beliefs rather than fostering critical discussion. Secondly, digital technology, social media in particular, plays an important role in mobilizing the Sunflower Movement. Social media further evolved into a virtual space for Taiwanese youth to engage in dialogue, reflect, and act across the boundaries of families, schools, and broader society. Interestingly, online discussions seem to be mere "informative" instead of "inspiring" to some Taiwanese youth, depending on their life experiences. Third, as a space for critical dialogues on the movement, social media provided Taiwanese youth with new avenues to receive information, engage with diverse perspectives on social and political issues amplified by the Sunflower Movement, and reflect on the values passed down by their families and schools. Lastly, most participants regarded the Sunflower Movement as pivotal in shaping their civic engagement. This movement inspired, motivated, and reinforced their interests in social issues they cared about, leading them to engage more actively in these areas afterwards.

The study identifies four key findings. First of all, college students' early civic engagement beliefs and behaviors emerge from relatively limited or one-sided dialogues at home and K-12 schooling. Secondly, in contrast to Taipei-based students in Study 1 who used social media to connect with individuals globally and facilitate dialogue, for students outside Taipei, social media functions as an echo chamber or parallel universe, reinforcing existing viewpoints rather than fostering more dialogue. Thirdly, despite Taiwan's compact geography, geographical distance further complicates the emergence of a critical juncture, as the university campus outside of Taipei has less access and fewer opportunities to participate in the 2014 Sunflower Movement. In this circumstance, campus climate plays an influential role in shaping students' civic engagement. Finally, similar to the findings of Study 1, students' civic engagement extends beyond the study. They remain engaged in follow-up actions to show their sustainable political awareness and civic participation.

Prior research on the Sunflower Movement is predominantly sociological and macro-level (Chen & Huang, 2015; Chen et al., 2016; Ho et al., 2020), leaving a knowledge gap regarding students' civic awakening process in education. The first phase of this project addressed students studying in Taipei. This study bridges the remaining gap by prioritizing the unheard voices of college students outside Taipei, offering a more nuanced understanding of the movement's success as a grassroots effort. By examining this diverse, geographically distant population, the study expands the application of Freire's theory and deepens theory-building at the intersection of family, school, and internet/social media experiences.

The findings will enhance our understanding of how university students outside the Taipei metropolitan area engaged in the movement despite physical distance from the main site. Furthermore, they illuminate how Taiwanese young adults, coming of age in the democratic and

Internet era, navigate and clash with diverse socio-political values, enriching our understanding of how they seek peace and social harmony in conflicting social settings.

References

Authors. (2024). Detailed excluded.

Chen Wan-chi and Huang Su-Jen. (2015). “Lifayuan wai de chunna: Taiyanghua yundong jingzuozhe zhi renkou ji canyu tuxiang” [Outcry outside the legislature: A portrait of Sunflower Movement sit-in demonstrators]. *Taiwan shehuixue [Taiwanese sociology]*, 30, 141–79.

Chen, Wan-chi, Heng-hao Chang, and Su-jen Huang. (2016). The coming of the networked social movement? Social ties and social media in the Sunflower Movement. *Journal of Social Sciences and Philosophy*, 28(4): 467-501.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press

Ho, Ming-sho, Huang, Chun-hao, & Lin, Liang-ying. (2020). The Sunflower imagination: The movement perception and evaluation from the grassroots. In Thomas Gold & Sebastian Veg (Eds.) *Sunflowers and Umbrellas: Social movements, expressive practices, and political culture in Taiwan and Hong Kong* (pp. 42-67). Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley.