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The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement as a non-profit organization: An empirical study on the use of visual branding practices for social change

Georgios Patsiaouras[1] | Anastasia Veneti[2] | William Green[1] 🔵

[1]School of Business, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

[2]Faculty of Media and Communications, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK

Correspondence
Georgios Patsiaouras, School of Business, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK.
Email: gp83@le.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, we draw our attention to the growth of a new social movement, as a non-profit organization which aims to effectively communicate its collective identity and messages to larger audiences. Initially, we provide a critical discussion on the interrelationships between marketing theory/practice and protest groups' promotional tactics. Afterwards, we focus on the interface between visual branding practices and new social movement's strategies to create a visual branding identity around their protest symbols and aims. In order to do so, we adopted a moderate participant observation approach to explore how the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement employed forms of visual branding to engage local and global audiences and induce social change. Drawing on a close examination of field notes and a visual analysis of digital archives and images from the protest sites, we identify and discuss the presence of several visual branding techniques for the imaginative promotion of the movement's demands and causes. Our findings suggest that the 2014 Umbrella Movement protesters coordinated and acted as non-profit organization which employed innovative and creative visual branding methods to enhance the movement's unity and trigger emotional responses from diverse audiences. We conclude the article with suggestions for future research around the interrelationships between social movements' protest symbols, transnational visual branding practices and non-profit organizational practices.

KEYWORDS
non-profit, promotion, protest symbols, social movements, visual branding

1 | INTRODUCTION

The broadening of marketing thought (Kotler & Levy, 1969) has gradually led to an expansion of the field's disciplinary space (Brownlie et al., 2009), facilitating critical and alternative perspectives of marketing theory and practice to emerge. Consequently, unconventional perspectives of marketing research have engaged with several innovative themes, such as consumer sovereignty/emancipation, methodological pluralism, ecofeminism and sustainable consumption, just to mention a few (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008). As a result, an emerging movement of non-conventional marketing studies paved the way to an in-depth exploration of ethical, social and methodological topics that have been rethinking well-established managerial perspectives and raise awareness of the interrelationships between the discipline of

marketing and wider social issues. Critically scrutinizing the basic assumptions of conventional or dominant marketing practices, has also prompted marketing scholars to move away from traditional market-related spaces and application – retail stores and advertising or branding for example – and focus on unexplored themes/contexts related to poverty (Venugopal & Viswanathan, 2017), marketplace exclusion (Saren et al., 2019) and community development (Peñaloza, 2009) amongst others. Overall, we notice a wider interest within critically orientated marketing studies to identify, investigate and debate contexts of marginalization, oppression and conflict. In the 21st century, the emergence of new social movements and protest camps, globally, has attracted the interest of social scientists (Feigenbaum et al., 2014); nonetheless, marketing scholars have provided limited theoretical engagement with the communication, organizational and brand esthetic practices employed by group actions that seek to create or resist social and political change in spite of their perceived success.

From Zuccoti Park in New York City to Syntagma Square in Athens, we observe that numerous social movements emerged and grew so as to raise their demands and opposition towards inequality, injustice, globalization and oppression (Brown & Yaffe, 2018; Feigenbaum et al., 2014; Jasper, 2014; Price & Sabido, 2014). Although events like the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, Euro-crisis, Brexit and Trump election have stirred a new wave of protests – primarily in the West – marketing scholars have paid limited attention to how social movements communicate and promote their ideas (Higgins and Tadajewski, 2002; Patsiaouras et al., 2018). Accordingly, in this article, we draw our attention to the growth of new social movements and forms of protest, and we seek to examine how they act as non-profit organizations which seek to foster social change while adopting marketing practices like promotion and in particular visual branding. We focus primarily on the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement protests, rather than more recent ones which remain to be evolving, and we discuss how groups of protesters employed forms of visual branding to engage audiences and induce social change. The main objectives of this article are threefold: (a) to critically discuss existing literatures on the interface between marketing and new social movements; (b) to identify the employment of visual branding techniques by the protesters for the creation of a collective identity and, (c) to suggest directions for future research around the interrelationships between social movements' role and capacity as decentralized and non-profit organizations which seek to foster social change.

2 | NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND THE PROMOTION OF VISUAL PROTEST SYMBOLS

The rise and growth of new social movements, over the last thirty years, has prompted several management and, to a lesser extent marketing theorists, to elaborate on their organizational structures and mobilization tactics (Bakker et al., 2017; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Della Porta & Diani, 2009). Organization theorists have elaborated on how

new social movements develop decentralized, improvisational and dynamic organizational forms (Austin & Seitanidi, 2014; Balsiger, 2015; Davies et al., 2014) so as to utilize materials, skills and existing resources for the effective promotion of their aims and causes. In particular management theories have shown how social movements relate environmental justice, ethical corporate practices and human rights to diffuse knowledge, tasks and expertise so as create working groups and teams for online and offline communications (de Bakker et al., 2013; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Haug, 2013). On the other hand, marketing scholars have paid limited attention to the imaginative organizational structures of new social movements and their promotional tactics. As King and Soule (2007) have suggested that social movements are institutional entrepreneurs and organizational agents who manage and form informal departments, channels and supply chains so as to effectively influence marketplace and government practices. Additionally, enduring social movements occupy public and commercial spaces so as to directly impact consumer culture and influence consumer choice (Soule, 2012). Accordingly, a close examination of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement as a non-profit organization which promoted its aims and causes via visual branding, can enhance our knowledge and understanding of how contemporary organizations can pay more attention to social movements' innovative means of communication.

Although Western pre-WWII social movements focused mainly on inequality and labour conditions, the post-war economic boom and cultural transformation introduced a series of new movements that imaginatively promoted demands for expressing new identities, lifestyles and ways of living (Buechler, 1995; Byrne, 1997). It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on their multifarious communication practices and campaigns, nevertheless it can been argued that compared to pre-war national protest groups, the 1960s and 1970s new social movements lasted longer and sought long-term change, at an international level, on issues related to peace, gay and women rights and ecology (Scott, 1990). The May 1968 events in France, opposition to USA involvement at the Vietnam War, the Gay Liberation Movement and prior to this, the civil rights movement not only defined an emerging youth culture that challenged traditional values but also effectively managed to engage artists, early forms of creative industries and emergent media like television and FM radio. The cultural creativity, artistic output and social experimentation of these movements developed a robust interrelationship with the rise of radical individualism, alternative forms of consumption, consumer culture and the evolution of marketing ideology in general (Binkley, 2003; Stinerock, 2015). Slowly, revolutionary images (Che Guevara/Angela Davies), slogans (the Future if Female) and events (Lennon's Bed-Ins for peace) were heavily employed by advertising and growing branding strategies towards well-educated, semi-affluent and anti-conformist young market segments.

The end of the Cold War and rise of neo-liberal government policies during the 1980's transubstantiated and transformed the old political movements (civil rights for example) into news forms of protest, or so called 'New Social Movements' (Beck, 1992; Habermas, 1981), demanding primarily social and cultural change in a

post-materialist society, rather than focusing on economic and military security. Although, these movements have been less militant, class-based, centralized and ideologically coherent on programmatic actions, compared to previous decades, it has been accurately suggested that both their media and public visibility have been much higher (Castells, 2004; Della Porta & Diani, 2009). Since the massive and violent 1999 Seattle protests, during the World Trade Organization Summit, the term 'anti-globalization' characterized many emerging protests that opposed global injustice, neoliberal policies and the unregulated political power of multi-national corporations (Klein, 2000). Confusing and quite often biased mainstream media reports have been both demonizing and occasionally eulogizing protesters' violent tactics and multi-media friendly creative activities (Higgins & Tadajewski, 2002). As media scholars argue, nowadays, activists and new social movements have turned into keen students of communication strategies which enable them to engage and mobilize audiences towards collective actions. In this space, we suggest that marketing theory and practice can also be informed by the rapid growth of multi-media friendly social movements and marketing savvy art activism. Exploring the occupied spaces of the Umbrella Movement, we identify and discuss the presence of several marketing technologies and specifically visual branding strategies for the promotion of protesters' demands. These findings can inform and update existing marketing studies that seek to rethink the concepts of urban space and visual branding, explore alternative forms of collective creativity and re-imagine the interface between marketing and new social movements.

3 | MARKETING, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND VISUAL BRANDING

The marketing literature has superfluously explored the communication tactics of protest campaigns and particularly the use of visual branding elements by protesters. Marketing scholars have primarily focused and elaborated, so far, on the interface and interrelationships between consumer movements and marketing communications (Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Weijo et al., 2018), highlighting – for example – how groups of consumers employ campaigns which resist unethical marketing and/or branding practices. On the other hand, an empirical and in-depth study around the promotional methods of a new social movement is missing from the literature. Accordingly, and moving beyond consumer tactics and methods of protesting and resisting marketplace forces, this article seeks to provide a fresh and original account on how a pro-democracy social movement has utilized marketing technological and visual branding practices so as to communicate their aims and goals to local and national audiences.

Levy and Kotler (1969) imaginatively suggested the expansion of the marketing concept beyond commercial transactions and argued that the demands of organized social protests against institutions' actions (government and firms, for example) necessitate a careful examination of an organization's 'basic purpose, its offerings, and the

effectiveness of its communication with the institution's clients' (Levy & Kotler, 1969, p. 67). Friedman (1996) aimed to shed some light on the motives behind the 1966 wave of consumer protests – following a rapid rise in supermarket prices – by conducting a mail survey with a sample of 125 activists and reported that protest leaders stressed their success in lowering the prices and the importance of direct action for the protection of consumer rights. Both studies indicated consumers and workers' willingness to oppose and challenge the pressures stemming from institutional/corporate power, such as staff redundancies and unnecessary financial burden. More recently, the production, politics and marketing of protest music was discussed by Drewett (2008). Skillfully analyzing the synthesis between marketing practices and the production of anti-apartheid protest music, the author proposed the introduction of promotional strategies, via artistic creation, for the communication of political messages to broader audiences. Furthermore, Ward and Ostrom (2006) innovatively examined how consumers' individual complaints turn into organized and collective actions, via the construction of protest websites against the unacceptable services of a particular firm. Analyzing several complaint websites, the authors identified similarities between consumer protesters' and civic protesters' demands related to injustice, betrayal and unjust treatment, and how they channeled – through technologically advanced communication means – their dissatisfaction to the public. Similarly, contemporary scholars have examined the motives behind consumer activism and boycott behavior via the use of the Internet and social media (Koku, 2012; Makarem & Jae, 2016). We observe how the World Wide Web emerges as an alternative protest site where consumers can expose, 'punish' and unite their voices against the unfulfilled promises of faceless corporations.

As Davis et al. (2005) argue, apart from the examination of social movements' activities against state-oriented systems of authority, more research is required on consumers' and workers' protest towards well-known brands, businesses and NGOs. Additionally, it has been well documented that activists' protests, supporting workers and consumers, can negatively influence stock price returns of reputable and powerful financial organizations (King & Soule, 2007). The aforementioned studies suggest that consumers express their disapproval towards the interests of influential institutions (global brands, supermarkets and multinational financial services corporations amongst others) employing a variety of collective actions (petitions, direct action) and/or individual practices (boycotts, Internet posts). We observe that some studies have discussed the phenomenon of consumer protests and consumer activism, however, a thorough examination around the presence of marketing practices within protest camps (e.g., promotion of visual material and distribution networks for political ideas and messages) has received limited attention in the field of marketing studies.

Social marketing scholars have more recently attempted to theorize how the discourses of social movements can be injected in social marketing practice and campaigns. Through the lens of social movement theory, Gurrieri et al. (2018) explored the campaign material and promotional methods of fat activists in Australia seeking to fight obesity. The authors identify differences between public health

campaigns and social movement's actions as regards the presentation of the issue (obesity) and efforts to encourage social change. They have meticulously discussed the multifaceted interface between marketing/advertising practices and social change (Andreasen, 2003; Gordon et al., 2016; Lefebvre, 2011), however, social transformation in the emerging realm of social marketing is mainly approached via changing behaviors and public policy, instead of group action and contentious public performances. Contrary to the exploration of influencing perceptions and behavior in controlled environments, the promotion of social change within protest camps entails uncontrolled dynamism, risk-taking practices and constant improvisation in altering settings. Focusing on protest camps activities, Higgins and Tadajewski (2002)) offered the most detailed study regarding the involvement of marketing technologies with anti-corporate protests, as parts of a sign-system within consumer society. Characterizing contemporary anti-corporate protestors as marketing savvy and multimedia friendly, the authors convincingly emphasized both the subtle presence of symbolic consumption within protest contexts and the utilization of marketing knowledge as a vehicle for discovering new audiences and spreading ideas to interrelated groups which support common aims. Higgins and Tadajewski (2002) prompted marketing scholars to carefully observe and assess how groups of protesters and activists engage with marketing/promotional practices which adopt a non-commercial and anti-authoritarian character. We observe that the aforementioned studies have primarily focused on consumer protest against institutional interests, online protests, protest music and social marketing campaigns. On the other hand, limited attention has been paid on the employment of visual branding practices by social movements. Visual branding, as a practice of combining visual elements such as materials, colors, fonts and shapes – amongst others –, has been explored within commercial settings seeking to explore how consumers' attention can be captured. Nonetheless, there is complete lack of research on social movements' efforts in utilizing visual branding strategies to reach local and international audiences of citizens and consumers.

In general, social movements' creative and collaborative activities have also received negligible attention in the realm of visual branding literatures. Phillips et al. (2014) examined how arts directors perceive visual brand identity and emphasized the conflicting interests within the supplier/client interrelationship. Rodner and Kerrigan (2018) provided novel insights on the role played by visual arts in reflecting and shaping a nation's identity, focusing on the context of Venezuela. They emphasize the dynamism of visual arts in altering cultural meanings and how publicly supported forms of visual arts can inform and mirror a nation's branding policies and strategies. Schroeder (2017) provided a critical, but also slightly generic, typology of branding perspectives that skillfully demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of the evolving and ever-growing branding literature. Following Schroeder (2017) both cultural and critical perspectives have elaborated on the interaction between society, consumers and culture whilst ideological and political environments shape the development of brand-building and brand meaning (Askegaard, 2006; Cayla, 2013; Levy & Luedicke, 2013; O'Reilly, 2006). The interplay between visual branding and political ideology has been critically explored in various settings such as vodka branding and politics in post-Soviet Russia (Kravets, 2012), social media spaces (Holt, 2016), brand authenticity in post-socialist Cuba (Chavez & Valencia, 2019) and politically motivated brand rejection in Turkey (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009) amongst others. Furthermore, the ideological use of branding has recently attracted global attention after Nike selected an American football player and civil rights activist for a new international advertising campaign (Forbes, 2018; The Guardian, 2019a; The Guardian, 2019b). Additionally, Pepsi's 'Live for Now' short commercial, featuring one of the Kardashian sisters, was heavily criticized and immediately removed as an unethical attempt to capitalize on the protest strategies of the 'Black Lives Matter' Movement (New Statesman, 2017). We notice that the ideological competency and performance of visual brands has been infused both in theoretical and practice-based contexts and realms of marketing management, over the last twenty years. We also observe that social marketing campaigns, global branding, nation branding strategies and digital marketing practices seek to inject a protest ethos within marketing communications aiming to change behaviors, attract youth segments, alter perceptions and engage online audiences, respectively.

In this article, we present a reverse, critical and alternative reading of visual branding ideology stemming from protesters' efforts to communicate their aims and causes to local and global audiences. Therefore, we move away from commercial settings to focus on visual branding promotions and techniques that occurred within the physical space, protest sites and digital avenues of the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. Accordingly, we will present and critically discuss some empirical findings on how protesters' esthetic and visual branding strategies aimed to mobilize audiences and express their opposition towards decisions, of the Hong Kong and Chinese states, deemed to be against democracy.

4 | HONG KONG'S UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

The city of Hong Kong has a globally unique historical, economic and cultural background characterized by a period of British colonialism (1841–1997) and the transfer of power to China that included a formal agreement for Hong Kong's legislative, electorate and financial autonomy (Shelton et al., 2011). Since the 1997 'Handover' to China, Hong Kong's Chief Executive was elected by a small body of representatives from various constituencies and political groups (Chan, 2014). The Chinese government promised, in 2007, that a complete democratic reform will take place in 2017, this included implementing universal suffrage and an autonomous electoral system (Chan, 2014). Nevertheless, in August 2014, China released a White Paper that imposed the pre-screening of candidates a few months before the Chief Executive Elections, significantly amending the terms of universal suffrage (Ortmann, 2015). These actions triggered a wave of dissatisfaction and dissent amongst Hong Kong citizens, who translated Chinese

government's involvement to their elections as a threat against their democratic rights and political autonomy (Ortmann, 2015). Consequently, for 3 months following the release of the White Paper, millions of protesters developed protest sites and camps on the key main arterial routes of the city (Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Monk Kong).

The Umbrella Movement took place in the city of Hong Kong between the 28th of September and 15th December 2014, (Chan, 2016). Although there was lack of central leadership and organization, it has been assessed that almost 1.2 million people got involved in the protest camps in different times and through a variety of activities and events (Tin-bor Hui, 2017). The long-term closure of schools, banks and retails stores generated divisiveness across the Hong Kong public and social media battles between the 'yellow', pro-Occupy, and 'blue', anti-Occupy, groups (Chan & Tsui, 2014). Such unexpected long-term occupation at a city-center that accommodates some of the world's leading financial institutions and shopping centers, significantly altered Hong Kong's touristic image of a destination defined by a commercial ethos (Po-Keung & Kin-Chi, 2015; Veg, 2016). As one of the movement's young leading activists' – Joshua Wong – stated in the New York Times, the Umbrella Movement "has demolished the myth that this is a city of people who care only about money...we want what everybody else in an advanced society seems to have: a say in our future" (Wong Chi-Fung, 2014). National, international and social media closely reported both on social movement's causes as well as emphasized the explosion of visual protest art activities within and outside the protest sites (Pang, 2016).

Yellow Umbrella installations, posters, banners, message boards on commercial spaces, calligraphy, chalk drawing on the pavements, performances and Democracy open-air classrooms represent only few amongst many promoted protest activities during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. A proliferation of visual protest symbols and messages prompted two preservation groups – the Umbrella Movement Visual Archive and Research Collective and the Umbrella Movement Art Preservation Group – to develop a digital archive and inventory where more than 2000 protest posters and artistic installations have been preserved (Pang, 2016; Qin, 2016). Eventually the protest sites were closed in December 2014 and, despite social movements' global outreach, the protesters did not achieve their goals or reach a common agreement with the Hong Kong government.

Four and half years after the Umbrella Revolution, a new wave of Hong Kong demonstrations, known as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement, sought to oppose Hong Kong's government plans to extradite criminal fugitives to countries, like Taiwan and mainland China, that Hong Kong has not to now developed extradition agreements (Wong, 2017). The extreme violence between the police and protesters has led many nations to issue travel warnings for Hong Kong, and the 2019 protesters' tactics have been more militant compared to the relatively peaceful and artistically creative 2014 Umbrella Movement. Apart from occupying Hong Kong airport, setting up roadblocks, starting hunger strikes and forming

human chains, a group of protesters managed to raise funding and place their own advertising messages – 'Stand with Hong Kong in G20' – in 10 international newspapers including the New York Times, The Guardian, The Globe and Japan Times (Cheng, 2019). Accordingly and moving beyond traditional fundraising practices within non-profit organizations (Herrero & Kraemer, 2020; Jones & Castillo, 2017; Kay Williams, 2006), we explore how a social movement has efficiently managed fundraising processes. Due to lack of space, we do not seek to scrutinize or discuss in more detail the political background and wider effects of the ongoing Hong Kong protests on the economy and society in general, but we will focus on the employment of visual branding techniques by protesters within the 2014 camps in the following sections.

5 | METHODOLOGY

To address our research objectives, we employed the methods of moderate participant observation (Bernard, 1994; DeWalt & DeWalt, 1998) and photo-documentation (Rose, 2012) to collect and analyze pictorial material that showed the use of protest symbols and visual branding methods within the occupied sites. Two researchers present at the Hong Kong protest sites completed the collection of the primary data during November 2014. Despite debates in studies supporting ethnography as a common approach in social movement studies (Uldam & McCurdy, 2013) and those discussing its paucity (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2013); we argue that the employment of moderate participant observation in protest research, the actual experience of observing the protests from inside – at the very time of happening – offers valuable insights in our comprehension of the types and causes of mobilization, along with the visual branding tactics employed by protesters. As early as mid-20th century Whyte (1945) was emphasizing the necessity for 'first-hand activity'. It is within this context that McAdam's (2002) observation of protests moved our knowledge beyond meso/macro level of collective behavior theories towards the actions and interactions of individuals. Due to time constraints and considering the confidentiality of accessing data on the protest sites, an ethnographic study or the development of a case study constituted an impossible task. Accordingly, we focused our research activities on moderate participant observation and photo-documentation with sensitivity towards protesters' activities and exposure.

Our primary data is comprised of observations, field notes, visual protest art objects and 300 photographic images that we took during our stay in Hong Kong. We spent 5 days in the protest camps (Admiralty and Mong Kok) interacting with protest activities (for example post-it writing), informally discussing with protesters and photographing visual tools employed by protesters to create a collective identity. Our empirical material has also been enriched with secondary data from digital archiving of photographic images (digital and openly accessible) that were collected and preserved by the Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective (Hilgers, 2015). Additional secondary data were collected via the Internet during the

ongoing 2019 Hong Kong protests to provide a panoramic angle of the phenomenon.

In our analysis, we employed a unifying approach trying to bring together our field notes and visually collected data and examined how one feeds the other; how links can be developed between our (researchers') interpretative work, the experience that was registered through our observation (Suchar, 1997) and the photographs we collected. Moreover, we used visual analysis (Rose, 2012) of the existing digital archives and our photographic material that served as 'records of reality, as documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions and events they depict' (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p.17). Visual analysis gives researchers a method for understanding and contextualizing images. Although photos, as descriptive devices, showed us patterns that would otherwise not be evident, it was visual analysis through the researchers' interpretative work that developed and refined the links to our research questions. To do so, all researchers of this project were involved in the examination, categorization and analysis of the photographic material, and the complementary field notes and secondary data.

We were interested in the physical, social and cultural changes that the protest camps and the various visual protest art objects brought to the urban environment and how people interacted with them. With regards to the photos taken by the researchers, we used a shooting script. Shooting scripts guide the photographic process as what is photographed is predominantly defined by the research questions (Suchar, 1997). As stated above this data set was enriched with other photos which were digitally archived. We then proceeded with a categorization of the photos across four main themes, namely, (a) photos of the protest camps (tents, facilities), (b) yellow umbrellas (distribution in space and style), (c) artistic activities and people's interaction with them, (d) other artistic installations (such as the comic super heroes). Once this process was completed, we kept those images that better depicted the topic of investigation and were of the highest quality. We attached codes to the photos and to further develop their links to the research questions, we added field notes to each photo that remained in the final data set.

Finally, our research fully complied with the general ethics standards for conducting such a research project (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010, p. 3). The anonymity and confidentiality of protesters were ensured, since we explored only photographic images that displayed the visual promotion of protest symbols and we totally removed or covered the faces of protesters and bystanders.
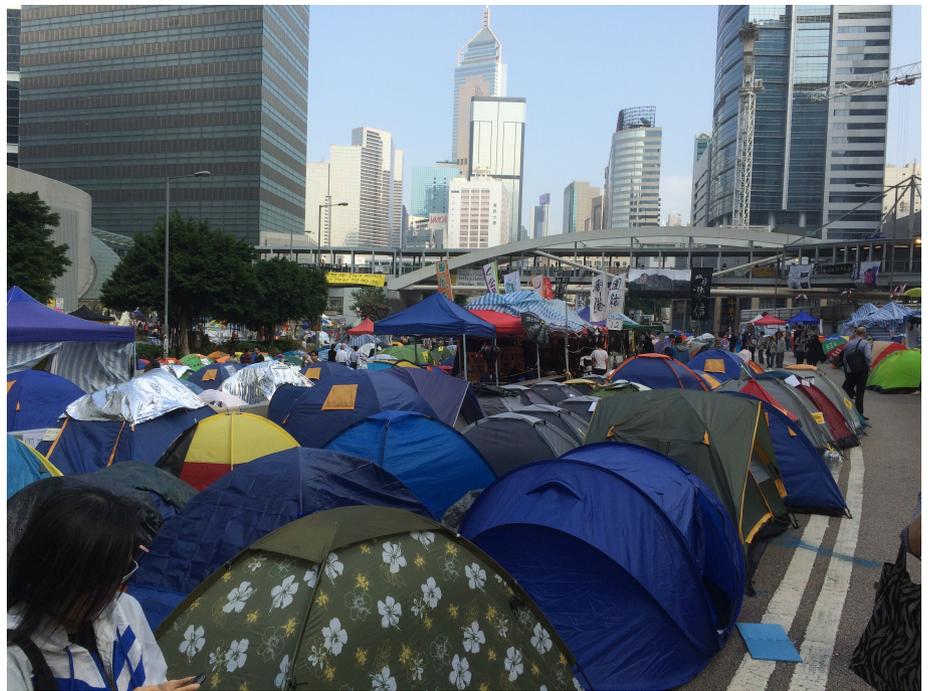
6 | THE VISUAL BRANDING OF THE YELLOW UMBRELLA

The two researchers immersed themselves in the research setting and the participant-observation process began at the largest occupied protest site of the Admiralty, at the central business district on Hong Kong Island. For 79 days, the protesters occupied eight lanes of traffic (both sides) whose length exceeded 1000 m, converting the urban space of asphalt, concrete and traffic into the epicenter of peaceful demonstrations, clashes with the police, speeches and artistic performances. Additionally, the Admiralty protest camp included facilities such as: toilets, a vegetable garden, a post-it note wall, an outdoor library, medical tents and special spaces for phone recharging, worship and recycling, amongst others. At the very heart of one of the world's leading financial and commercial centres, a peculiar antithesis was arising between a jungle of gleaming and supertall skyscrapers against the lively intervention of a growing, dynamic and highly visible social movement promoting its causes via visual methods, acts of resistance and political interaction (see Figure 1).

In the protest camps of the Admiralty and Nathan Road, together with other parts of the city, the conspicuous visibility of yellow umbrellas was capturing both the attention and imagination of protesters, tourists and passengers. The social movement's unifying symbol of political resistance was emerging in different forms and on diverse spaces such: as yellow umbrellas printed on posters and banners; a canopy of interlaced open umbrellas hanged between two footbridges; two-meter tall yellow umbrellas positioned on each side of the occupied avenue; cranes of origami yellow umbrellas displayed in shopping malls and tube stations; a cardboard, life size, cut-out of China's leading historical figures holding yellow Umbrellas; and – amongst other things–, a 10 foot-high statue made of wood blocks holding a yellow umbrella (known colloquially as Umbrella Man). In comparison with marketing-related visual branding campaigns in the arts and service sectors for example (Kim & Lim, 2019; Melewar et al., 2005; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015), it is worth noticing the gradual emergence of the 'yellow umbrella' as a promoted protest symbol and movement's collective visual identity. In late September 2014, a Twitter post by a well-known American reporter coined the term 'Umbrella Revolution' referring to the heroic employment of protesters' umbrellas as means of protection against police tear gas (Luger & Ren, 2017). Following the cataclysm of multi-colored umbrella virtual logos on social media, in the following weeks Hong Kong's leading demonstrators immediately realized its symbolic power as a unifying dissent symbol, along with its functional use during November's 2014 tropical rains. A cover of October 2014 TIME magazine depicting an activist holding a yellow umbrella added a global appeal to protesters' visual icon of unity and resistance (Ming, 2015). As a matter of fact, Time Magazine's visual images and covers have been playing a seminal role – for almost a century – in shaping public perceptions, opinions and interpretations around global events and turbulent socio-economic environments. Synoptically, collective views and perceptions around the Vietnam War (Time, 2021), Iraq War (Popp & Mendelson, 2010), nationalism (Cantrell-Rosas-Moreno et al., 2013) and 21st century activism (Time, 2020), have been both shaped and altered as outcome of both investigative journalism and the use of powerful visual imagery from those events. In particular, the 2014 Umbrella Movement cover image at The Times has been a catalyst in raising and enhancing global awareness around Hong Kong protesters' pro-democracy struggles and aims.

Unpredictably, protesters did not limit the promotional activities of their visual symbol through logos, typography, shapes and tangible materials but they efficaciously utilized the Internet as means of

co-creating and highlighting the emblematic resonance of umbrellas as a sign of peaceful and passive confrontation. One anonymous artist, academic and protester – with whom the two researchers had the chance to discuss and interact during his participatory street drawing activities – created an online contest for Umbrella Movement's best logo that received thousands of submissions from all over the globe, including acclaimed street artists (Li, 2014). The universal and digital participation for the creation of social movement's logo shows how co-creation branding tactics penetrate and become increasingly popular amongst non-profit organizations. Considering the growing literature around the online co-creation of brands (Baron & Harris, 2008; Cova et al., 2015; Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013; Samuel et al., 2018), we suggest that the Umbrella Movement's non-hierarchical and inclusive promotional strategies allowed and facilitated the rise of a truly collective logo originating both from the basis of protest groups, as well as, from online supporters and global audiences. Additionally, in the realm of commercial marketing and consumer culture, it has been suggested how types of consumer co-creation have been employed as forms of political power which can adopt an exploitative nature around consumers' labour and creative capacities (Zwick et al., 2008). Firms and global brands have been adopting and promoting co-creative services and practices seeking to establish a long-term customer relationship which will eventually result in repeated purchases and financial gains. Nonetheless, in the context of the Umbrella Movement, we observe the emergence and spontaneous growth of an organic and collective co-creation process characterized by improvisation, openness and collaboration that aims to serve common political goals and social causes. Popular and somehow mainstream branding tactics like crowdsourcing, democratization of content, brand co-creation and sharing platforms should not be viewed only as technologically advanced vehicles for the evolution of products, services and

commercial ideas. We identify that an open and non-centralized political movement adopts a voluntary logo design competition to generate visual brand materials that seek to mobilize, inspire and unite local and global audiences towards the ideals and demands of freedom, autonomy and political reform.

Over the last decade, sociologists, media scholars and social movement theorists have begun introducing terms like 'contentious branding', 'movement marketing' and 'strategies for social change' (Beraldo, 2017; King & Pearce, 2010; Robnett & Alabi, 2015), indicating the dynamic interface between promotional methods and social change. Likewise, marketing scholars can explore in more depth how social movements – like the Umbrella Movement – build emotional connections with diverse audiences via the co-created visual branding of political and social symbolism. Sawer (2007) has provided a thorough review, from a socio-historic perspective, around the significance of colors for social movements and their use in building collective actions, identities and social goals. Colors and promotion of visual material by organized groups of resistance produce 'symbolic languages that are about emotional identification as well as about organizational needs for distinctive brands and brand loyalty, to use the language of modern marketing' (Sawer, 2007, p. 54). We observed the organic spread and dominance of yellow, both as background and font color, on ribbons, tents, artistic installations, posters, post-it notes, protest calligraphy and clothing amongst others. It is unknown how yellow turned into the central color for the Umbrella Movement campaign and the authors assume that it either emerged as a symbol of sorrow or empathy (Crook, 2004) or protesters were inspired by the 1876 US suffragette movement who wore yellow ribbons and sang the song 'The Yellow Ribbon' (Lindenmayer, 2000).

Interestingly and during the massive and wide-spread, ongoing 2019 Hong Kong protests, as reaction to the government's

controversial extradition bill, police's extreme violence has prompted protesters to replace the 'soft' yellow umbrellas with black hardhats signifying a form of mute resistance against state oppression and extreme police brutality (Financial Times, 2019). Similar to corporate, non-profit and political organizations, social movements' visual brand symbolism evolves and reflects the existing socio-political climate as well as protesters' feelings and emotions. We suggest that both branding scholars and brand managers should meticulously follow new social movements' tactics, creativity and improvisation around the production and promotion of their symbols. In an era where one-dimensional, manipulative and traditional advertising/branding messages fail to comprehend changing societal values, marketing managers can themselves dive into and learn from the creative expression, sources and dynamics of frustration, injustice and resistance that mobilizes young people all over the world.

7 | HEROES AS VEHICLES OF VISUAL POLITICAL BRANDING

During periods of social unrest, cultural icons such as comic superheroes are often appropriated to capture activists' narratives of 'their good' versus their 'oppressor's evil', the superheroes growing in popularity themselves when they reinforce these contemporary narratives (Di Paolo, 2011). It was no surprize therefore that at the heart of the central protest camp (Admiralty) an art stand stood displaying a canvas on which protesters promoted images of their superheroes narrating the discourse of good heroes, in some cases representations of the colonial past, fighting evil, including illustrations that could be interpreted to reflect past regimes. Next to the superheroes, other cultural icons including politicians, celebrities and historical figures had also been appropriated to support the movement with images doctored with the, by-then, iconic yellow umbrella. The most recognizable fictitious and iconic characters collaged together and seen by the meandering tourists would have been: the Dark Night, Batman; the actor, martial artist and philosopher Bruce Lee; the lawyer, anti-colonial nationalist and supporter of non-violent protest, Mahatma Gandhi; the research scientist who falls victim of an accident, Hulk; the powerful yet arrogant God, Thor; Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II; and the Argentinian Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara. These unusually ideologically incompatible revolutionaries, leaders and superheroes captured tourist and another protesters' attention (see Figure 2). These caricatures will have inevitably catalyzed emotions, such as, joy and surprise as a result of the immediate pictorial representation - positive feelings – and subsequently led to converse emotions such as, sadness and even anger, as their meaning emerged as a result of the sentiment towards the activists' struggle for social change. Some were exchanged for donations or circulated for free as a part of what would ordinarily be deemed an expensive, expert and well considered marketing, brand and media campaign of a corporate world.

Portraying such an ethnically, politically and culturally diverse set of characters undoubtedly contributed to the universal support for the movement due to the transnational and inclusivity communicated

FIGURE 2 comic heroes. *Source*: Image taken from Admiralty, 19/10/2014

to visitors, international media and the Hong Kong native. This is certainly evidenced through the Cold War propaganda and paranoia of the 1950s and 1960s attributed to the American superheroes' moral codes, traits and actions which reflected the political climate of the era (Dittmer, 2013). This historical masculine, white, Anglo-Saxon patriotism reflected in the 1950s and 1960s has been challenged in more recent Asian and Western superheroes (Dittmer, 2013). This rebuke is supported and was observed through the diverse range of characters reflected in the movement's art stands as illustrated in Figure 2.

The observations of cultural icons, heroes and heroines were not isolated to either one of the protest sites with images appropriated by protestors located at both the Admiralty and Causeway Bay. This included, in parallel, images of Iron Man, James Bond and Nintendo's Super Mario adjacent to characters of Japanese Manga elevating yellow umbrellas or accompanied by signage making demands for democracy. Visual and auditory stimulus was designed to inspire protestors through supersession – bridging the gap between a fiction of not winning the movement's demands and a reality where the battle is won – depicting these fictitious characters in our reality, winning the battle. For example, provocative visuals synthesized with anti-authoritarian and inspiring messages depicted Neo, Matrix's protagonist, demanding a revolution against Chinese manipulation and invasion, V for Vendetta's anarchist superhero symbolizing good versus evil grand narratives, Martin Luther King's and John Lennon's 'I Have a Dream' and 'Imagine' slogans and images respectively. Photoshopping images of the Spartan King Leonidas kicking the messenger of Xerxes into a pit, following a formal demand for surrender, protesters created a 'Spartan' local protester declaring Hong Kong's independence (Garrett, 2014). The anthem 'Do you hear the people sing' – a revolutionary inspired song – from the acclaimed musical 'Les Miserables' was adapted with Cantonese pro-democracy lyrics and heard through megaphones in the protest space and beyond.

In the latter years of the transition of Hong Kong to become a communist Chinese sovereignty, departing from a colony of the British Crown, prior to 2007, political rhetoric framed discourses of good versus evil (Garrett, 2014). This discourse leaked into comics throughout the transition period (Garrett, 2014) so the use of these characters in the Hong Kong protests could be seen as a natural extension and continuation of these political discourses. In everyday consumption the good versus evil representation is frequently appropriated in similar ways through heroes and villains. For example, Masters and Mishra (2018) demonstrated that the placement of heroes and villains on food packaging has a direct impact on consumers with heroes making vice foods perceived to be less harmful and villains used to make virtue foods more desirable and fun. It is clear that similar strategies, those depicted above, were adopted by the protestors that we saw in Hong Kong. This would suggest that the protests demonstrate both, a borrowing of established commercial and corporate tactics, while pushing these strategies well beyond their corporate, sponsorship, supermarket and shopping centre boundaries, and the innovation of these approaches.

Eventually, the simplification and cultural popularization of these transnational, cross-cultural and universal protest symbols fostered a mobilizational capability accomplished to evoke positive emotional responses from diverse audiences. We suggest that protesters' visual branding aestheticism and the employment of international protest-related characters could inform and update both transnational visual branding practices amongst Asian brands (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Wu et al., 2013) and celebrity endorsement studies on morality (Zhou & Whitla, 2013), so as to reach younger audiences. Overall, protesters' spatial and esthetic practices generated an inventive and imaginative amalgamation of visual, concrete and acoustic symbolism which both re-aestheticized the urban space and enhanced the visibility of both movements' creativity and moral demands for justice. Consistent practices were operationalized on the ground, physically, and globally, virtually to great effect. In a commercial world this would reflect a very strong and successful omni-channel strategy at the cutting edge of marketing and branding. Or potentially beyond those seen in a commercial world as the tactics successfully provoked emotional responses in the global, protest consumer.

8 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The terms marketing, demonstration and protest is likely to introduce an antithetical resonance to marketing theorists since the theoretical realm of social movements' communication strategies has been discussed hitherto by political scientists and media scholars (Della Porta, 2011). We argue that compared to the dynamic presence of marches and picket lines of labour unions, revolutionary organizations and activists in the past, which aimed to attract media attention and disrupt production, contemporary 'new social movements' possess the capacity to develop systematically and imaginatively the promotional means to change perceptions, mobilize communities, attract sympathizers, and capture and sustain online and offline followers. This study has sought to provide a novel exploration of how the Umbrella Movement employed visual branding practices to effectively communicate their aims and messages related to autonomy and democracy to the wider public. Synoptically, we highlight how protesters employed images, collaborative art, popular culture, crowdfunding campaigns, websites and public spaces amongst other to visually promote their aims and causes. We suggest that marketing scholars and brand managers can conduct further research on how the non-centralized structures, collective creativity and spontaneous mobilization of social movements can not only inform marketing theoretically but also practically. The latter through the adoption or injection of socially-conscious and anti-authoritarian messages within established global/local brands and their impact on consumers, non-commercial interests and society in general.

First, our findings show how the Umbrella Movement's key visual logo emerged and became globally recognizable following an open, spontaneous and collaborative process between local protesters,

online sympathizers and international media reports. We notice that the simplicity, esthetic memorability and universal appeal around the cooperative building of the yellow umbrella visual brand gradually achieved to foster a collective identity amongst diverse Hong Kong pro-democratic organizations, enhance public participation and increasingly attract worldwide social and mainstream media attention. Critically oriented research on brand esthetics and visual branding theorists (Hatch, 2012; Schroeder, 2006; Schroeder et al., 2015) can expand their disciplinary boundaries and explore the capacity of social movements' promotional tactics in creating (e.g., the Arab Spring uprising) / resisting change (e.g., the anti-globalization movements) or empower marginalized or disenfranchised social groups. Although commercial institutions and social movements might employ similar attributes throughout a visual branding process (e.g., color, logo mark, shape, materials) (Fajardo et al., 2016; Montana et al., 2007) contemporary marketing managers need to develop an astute understanding behind the rise, growth and popularity of protest groups. During the 20th and 27th of September 2019, a record of 7.6 million people – the vast majority between 15 and 25 years old –, in 185 countries went on strike for climate change action (Global Climate Strike, 2019). Throughout the same week, the 16-year-old leader of the youth climate movement (YouNGO) and 2019 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Greta Thunberg, gave a powerful and controversial address for the UN Climate Action Summit in New York (The Guardian, 2019a; The Guardian, 2019b). Alike the Umbrella Movement, the simplicity of the nascent activist movement's message, logo and online campaigns have successfully achieved to inspire and mobilize a teenager global movement that aims to take action on climate change. Transformative or reformative approaches to sustainability marketing (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019) and governmental/NGO environmental campaigns should methodically observe, engage and, possibly, subtly coalesce with the peaceful mobilization tactics and social media campaigns of these young protesters. Accordingly, we suggest that environmentally friendly, socially aware and equality-driven marketing and branding, in particular, practices should view the co-production and metaphoric use of peaceful social movements' visual symbols as a socio-cultural barometer of changing values and manifestation of generational beliefs.

Second, we show how the Umbrella Movement managed to achieve a transnational reach and mobilize global audiences via its visual brand building and universal esthetic symbolism. In a highly mediated and visually literate society, like Hong Kong, Marvel heroes, Western political figures, legendary peace activists and revolutionaries were competently injected within movement's visual brand tactics as supporters of Hong Kong's counter-hegemonic struggle and symbols of freedom, autonomy and political solidarity. The visually peculiar and ideologically confusing visual amalgamation of American, Central Asian, British and Japanese superheroes and political figures managed to shape the transnational imagination of global audiences and incite the sense of a timeless, multi-cultural and transnational space of pro-independence struggle. Existing literature on transnational branding practices (Buschgens et al., 2019; Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Wu

et al., 2013), could approach and explore how the non-linear creativity, esthetic imagination and cross-cultural sensitivity of new social movements shape and reinforce confrontational, imaginary and international group identities related to justice and social change. Our findings can be useful for creative campaigns and arts initiatives for arts organizations and internationally orientated NGOs that aim to communicate issues around inequality, social justice and global human rights by reaching global audiences. Also, celebrity endorsement research (Erdogan, 1999; Hackley & Hackley, 2015; McCracken, 1989) can explore how the convergence of (social) media channels interweave market segments and demographics within a fluid and dynamic space where the intertextuality amongst global brands (Nike and Pepsi recently), protest communications and heroic/villain figures are bringing forward both a synergistic spirit and dialectic tensions between commercial interests and social causes.

Third, and drawing upon both the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the ongoing 2019 Hong Kong protests, this study highlights the interconnectedness between social movements and global branding strategies. The world's most valuable company, Apple removed in October 2019 a mobile application that showed real-time locations of Hong Kong police vehicles and police activities, after the Chinese's government accusation that the applications seeks to protect rioters and disturb social order (The Guardian, 2019a; The Guardian, 2019b). During the same month, Google removed from its platform – following pressures from China – 'The Revolution of Our Times' a popular choice-based story game where the players adopt the character of a Hong Kong protester who engages in activities like protests, potential arrest and even extradition to China (Hong Kong Free Press, 2019). We notice that, global brands, are engulfed in a dilemma of showing subtle support for a pro-Western, pro-democracy social movements whilst keeping intact their popularity and brand appeal in the world's largest and growing national market. Following the example of USA–China trading wars and its resonance to Hong Kong's ongoing protests, we argue that the rise of urban social movements globally might constitute a spatial and ideological terrain where global branding strategies will be directed and shaped both by commercial interests as well as the demands of social change that influence foreign affairs and diplomatic relationships.

Conclusively, this study emphasizes the importance for social movements to create a strong and communicative visual identity that aims to reflect collective aims and trigger emotional responses from diverse audiences. Additionally, it shows how social movements act as non-profit organizations which seek to communicate their aims and causes to wider audiences. Focusing on the use and combination of political colors, brand esthetics, technological tools and symbolic language utilized by the Umbrella Movement for the building and promotion of its visual/branding common identity, we argue that marketing scholars could pay more attention on protesters' collaborative efforts to promote their demands via the visible elements of unifying dissent symbols. Moreover, marketing theorists can also explore in more depth how global brands place emphasis on the concepts of community, authenticity and equality and how this trend appeals to wider

audiences and investors or invigorates transnational tensions and diplomatic crisis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings have been anonymized in order to protect individuals' anonymity.

ORCID

William Green https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4161-4490

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