Revisiting contingency theory in regenerative social-mediated crisis: An investigation of Maxim's and Yoshinoya in Hong Kong's polarized context

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how the social media-based crisis response of two organizations operating in a specific polarized context unfolds along a regenerative crisis lifecycle in line with the contingency theory of accommodation. By analyzing two crises that affected the Maxim's and Yoshinoya groups during the Hong Kong social unrest in 2019, the paper commits to explicate how internal, socio-environmental, and external publics' factors shape the communication patterns of the crisis. By focusing on Facebook posts and information available online, this study examines how the two selected organizations responded to specific crisis situations, and how publics reacted during the regenerative crisis lifecycle. Results show that Maxim's took the advocative, while Yoshinoya engaged in the accommodative stance initially. Then, they both turned to an avoidance stance to deal with active online publics with opposing political stances. Contingent factors driving the organizations to adopt specific stances were relevant to internal members, organizational characteristics, social media environment, and external publics. Results provide insights about the complexities organizations face to respond to online publics in regenerative social-mediated crises. They also advance the contingency theory by refining the advocacy-accommodation stance continuum, re-defining contingent factors, and explicating the interactive effects of contingent factors on organizational response decision making in a polarized and social-mediated context.

1. Introduction

This article is included in the Public Relations Review special section on the contingency theory of strategic conflict management. The contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997) is a public relations (PR) theory that has been widely embraced to study conflict and crisis management. By suggesting that organizations and publics communicate dynamically, the theory proposes 87 internal and external contingent variables that help PR practitioners identify the factors that foster organizational change and the elements that generate changes in communication strategies when managing conflicts. In line with this theory, communication response stances can be identified on a continuum between *advocacy* and *accommodation*. However, most of the extant studies have not explicitly focused on the dyadic factors to test the organization-public relationships (OPR) (Cheng Y, 2019).

In a world where global polarization is becoming a trend that can impact both organizations and publics, especially on social media platforms (Lee C, 2018; Lee T.K, 2018; Wang, Feng, Hong, Berger, & Luo, 2017), people increasingly perceive reality in terms of groups and

stances membership (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Influenced by algorithms that stimulate selective exposure and reinforce their beliefs primarily through what is known as *echo chamber effect*, social media users tend to easily hold extreme stances, which are ideologically opposed to each other, and refuse to hear from people with other stances (Geiger, 2016; Lee C, 2018; Narayanan et al., 2018).

In the polarized era, organizational publics are empowered by social media, which determines crises be frequently social-mediated, or, at least, discussed on social media. As the nature of social-mediated crises is dynamic and regenerative, organizations are required to switch their response strategies to address the shifting crisis situations (Coombs, 2017). Individual stakeholders that are active online, in fact, are not only involved in relationships with organizations, but they also find themselves in public-public networks (Mak & Ao, 2019). As a result, stakeholders' opinions shared and interacted online are increasingly a component of the crisis environment that must be considered by organizations. Therefore, the use of contingency theory to address the dynamic crisis nature requires that some contingent variables – e.g., those related to external publics and social contexts – are refined to highlight

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Table 1
Important posts and example comments of both cases.

Original announcement by Maxim's (in traditional Chinese)	*Translated version*
伍淑清沒有擔任任何職位，亦無參與任何管理……（關於社會事件）衷心希望各方能解決分歧，社區早日如常運作……就相關事件對顧客造成的不便致歉……	Annie does not serve as a member, or involve in the management of the company…(about the social unrest) we sincerely wish that the disputes can be solved and the community works can get back to usual soon…and we are sorry to our customers about all the inconveniences caused by recent events…
Original announcements of Annie Wu (in traditional Chinese)	*Translated version*
（反對逃犯條例）只是一小撮示威者的意見，並不能代表 750 萬香港人。香港人不會饒恕這種精心策劃的系統性暴力。	The views of a small group of radical protesters do not represent the views of all 7.5 million Hongkongers. The systematic and calculated violent acts of this group have never been condoned by all Hongkongers.
特區政府提出修改逃犯條例是出於好心，但卻遭到激進示威者的挾持，成為削弱香港政府威信的政治宣傳，而香港政府只是為了維護一個已死港人的人權而已。	The bill is well-intended but hijacked by radical protesters who have used it as propaganda to undermine the Hong Kong government's authority to protect the rights of one of its citizens even in her death.
我認為我們已經失去了整整兩代年輕人……我會放棄（這些年輕人），不會再浪費時間去跟他們講甚麼，因為他們的腦子已經不清楚自己應該做甚麼事情，這已經是不可挽回的現象。	I think we have lost two generations of young people in Hong Kong…I have given up hope [on these youngsters] and will not waste my time talking to them, as they have no idea what they are doing and what they should do ... Their brains have been occupied by other ideas and that is irrevocable.
Original Facebook post by Yoshinoya (in traditional Chinese)	*Translated version*
唔准叫我獅子狗，想食獅子狗，唔只大埔有.	Don't call me a "lion dog" (a humiliating metaphor of Hong Kong police). Lion dogs are not only at Tai Po (a suburban district in New Territories).
Following response by Yoshinoya (in traditional Chinese)	*Translated version*
(Marvin Hung, the CEO): 事先並不知情，對此感到極為憤怒……有關廣告已刪除，外包廣告公司已解約，負責廣告事務的公司員工已被解聘。	Marvin: (I) did not know this event before, and (I) was very angry about that. The advertisement has been removed, the contract with the advertising company has been cancelled, and the employee who was responsible to this advertisement has been fired.
(Marvin Hung, the CEO): 只是個別員工自發行為……他剛剛參加了 6 月 30 日的撐警大會……對發生此事感到非常痛心。	Marvin: The advertisement was only from an individual employee's personal and spontaneous behavior. He (the employee) just attended an assembly to support Hong Kong police…He was very sad about this event.
(Official Yoshinoya Facebook): 所有小編都整整齊齊. #媽劇停小編所有人都仲番緊工	(Official Yoshinoya Facebook): All our marketing colleagues are at work together (no one was fired).
Examples of Facebook comments of both cases (in traditional Chinese)	*Translated version*
美心而家先割蓆，真係搵鬼信→_→	Cutting the connection with her (Annie Wu) now? Nobody believes that→_→
創辦人長女已失心瘋 我會放棄美心	The founder's daughter is out of her mind, I will give up Maxim's.
仲未清盤 繼續努力👌▨	There are still some stores open, we should keep doing this👌▨.
你撐警 我罷食 完	You support the police; I boycott your brand. Period.
親中親到要與民為敵的話，係要付出的	If you want to get that close to China, you are antagonizing us (Hong Kong people). That is the price you have to pay.

the crisis cycle nature on social media.

Past crisis communication studies investigated the effects of advocacy and accommodation as predominant crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2006), yet not many studies have exceeded a strategic focus on pure advocacy or accommodation (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2011). With the rise of social media centrality and the activism of online publics, the use of *avoidance* (i.e., refraining from responding to aggressive comments) or *diversion* has been increasingly adopted by PR practitioners with the aim of safeguarding the relations between organizations and their publics (Cheng, 2016; Dignath, Kiesel, & Eder, 2015; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005).

2. Case background

The cultural context of Hong Kong is dynamic and complex. As part of the Greater China region, segments of the Hong Kong population are influenced by Chinese traditions such as the Confucian ethics or family-oriented thoughts (Lin & Ho, 2009). At the same time, the colonial history has shaped the local culture and identity and further laid the foundation of localism (Erni, 2001). The occidental background has also nurtured a democratic culture among Hong Kong people (Morris, Kan, & Morris, 2000). In recent years, influenced by the emerging pro-Beijing (or pro-government) political forces and the growing inequalities in wealth and class, localism has become a salient political stance in Hong Kong, one that proclaims universal values and cosmopolitanism. This ideology aims to rebuild the local communities with progressive democracy and diversity (Chen & Szeto, 2015; Kaeding, 2017; Veg, 2017). These cultural features compete with one another and act as an underlying reason of the socio-political conflicts in Hong Kong.

Since the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty back to China in 1997, the political tension climbed to a peak with the so-called Umbrella Movement in 2014. This social movement emerged as an attempt to fight for universal suffrage for the 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election (Chan, 2016; Cheung, 2017). Following the elections, though, the social unrest did not cease. Instead, it escalated to a more serious situation with the Anti-Extradiction Law Amendment Movement in 2019. To an extent, the failure of the Umbrella Movement resulted in a more radical social movement with an increased appeal of localism among the younger generation (Chung, 2020). This deepened the politicization of the Hong Kong community.

The Hong Kong social unrest outbroke on March 15, 2019, caused massive effects on businesses and society, and created conflicts between pro-Beijing and pro-democracy advocates. The first demonstration with around one million people marching to show they were against the extradition bill took place on June 9, 2019 (Hong Kong: Timeline of extradition protests, 2019). According to the Hong Kong SAR Government, the Bill was proposed to amend the Fugitive Offender Ordinance in relation to special surrender arrangements and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Ordinance, to establish a mechanism for such transfers not only for Taiwan, but also mainland China and Macau. The democratic party and local citizens showed great concerns about the Bill, which was said to undermine the legal freedom in Hong Kong by potentially allowing other suspects to be extradited to mainland China.

A bigger stand-off happened three days later (June 12), with the mass demonstration developing into a more violent protest. The Hong Kong Chief Executive announced the decision to postpone the discussion of the Bill for an indefinite term on June 13. Protesters were not satisfied with the resolution made by the Government, which led to the organization of further protests and demonstrations in the following months. The confrontation between the protesters and the Hong Kong Police also became heated. On July 1, some protesters forced entry to the Legislative Council building, with damages made.

After several large events, including a massive march in the Kowloon district on July 7, the Chief Executive's re-iterated the death of the Bill on July 9. On July 21, when pro-democracy protesters were defacing the China's Liaison Office in the Wanchai district, it was reported that a mob

of men armed with steel rods and rattan canes who were suspected triad members and pro-government attacked commuters including the elderly and children. The attack took place in the nearby train stations in Yuen Long, a suburban district in the New Territories. Protesters were angry about the actions the city Police engaged in various demonstrations and demanded a thorough investigation. Since then, violence and vandalism became the norm for some advocates in the political movement in Hong Kong. By involving almost all Hong Kong population, these protests caused two deaths, more than 2600 injuries, more than 10,000 detentions, and hundreds of billions of economic losses in Hong Kong Dollars.

2.1. Political consumerism

Directly affected by the action of protesters, most businesses in Hong Kong were forced to proclaim if they supported or opposed the movement. As a result, the Hong Kong Government took tougher measures to suppress the social unrest and the division of the political voices became much more salient (Chung, 2020). This deepened the *politicization* and *polarization* of the Hong Kong community, which caused people to be more disrespectful and unwilling to communicate with those holding different political stances. Such phenomenon did not only unfold in street protests, it also extended to consumer market.

A rise of *political consumerism* in Hong Kong also occurred during this social unrest. The literature defines political consumerism as "using one's buying power to make a political point" (Shah et al., 2007, p. 217). Some people in Hong Kong started to make their political stance by re-allocating their spending. Since the burst of the anti-extradition bill movement, people in Hong Kong took on positions that divided them into two camps, the so-called "yellow-ribbon" camp (i.e., those against the Bill) and the "blue-ribbon" camp (i.e., those in favor of the Bill). People started to label businesses and brands as "yellow-ribbon" or "blue-ribbon" depending on whether the former thought they supported or where against the Bill. Most advocates of the yellow-ribbon camp belong to the younger generation and are the primary target market segment of consumer goods and brands. Political consumerism including boycott and attacking the blue-ribbon businesses on the social media has become a powerful tool for the yellow-ribbon camp, which caused regenerative crises on social media for multiple organizations and brands involved in this socio-political conflict.

The political consumerism became central and studies reported that about 99% of protesters boycotted pro-Beijing businesses (Chung, 2020). Opinion-makers defined these dynamics as the first time in which the pro-democracy camp of Hong Kong adopted economic means for their protests. Maxim's group, one of Hong Kong's largest food and catering firms founded in 1956, which includes restaurants, bakeries, Starbucks Hong Kong, and Genki Sushi Hong Kong, became a main target of protesters. It was labeled as a "blue shop" because the daughter of its founder, Annie Wu, publicly expressed her pro-Beijing political stance and criticized the protesters (see Table 1). Maxim's announcement that Annie Wu was not a member of the company did not work to calm protesters, which continued to boycott it both online and offline. Maxim's had become a target of protesters and their restaurants across Hong Kong were boycotted and damaged in the months before and after Annie Wu gave the contested media interview in August, 2019. Online reports increasingly showed photos of protesters smashing outlets of Genki Sushi, Starbucks and Maxim's Chinese restaurants. Negative comments and emotions toward Maxim's were expressed on social media platforms, while many Maxim's shops were attacked and destroyed by the yellow-ribbon protesters. At present in 2022, Maxim's Facebook posts, regardless of their content, continue to be targeted with negative comments and by using emojis representing feelings of anger.

Yoshinoya is a fast-food chain originated in Japan in 1899 and its operations in Hong Kong have been run by a franchise since 1991. Yoshinoya Hong Kong is one of the youth's favorite fast-food restaurant chains, as the young generation in Hong Kong is fond of the Japanese

culture. It underwent a rapid turnover of their image in July 2019. Yoshinoya was not identified as a "blue shop" until July 10, 2019. On that day, a Yoshinoya's branch office in Hong Kong released a sarcastic Facebook post in association with humiliating the city Police, which was quickly retreated on the same day (Cheng, 2019). The scandal originated from the use in the post of the nickname "paper-ripping dog" or "lion dog," which some protesters gave to the policemen. Particularly, since the Cantonese pronunciation of the nickname is very similar to a famous Japanese fish-based food, i.e., "chikuwa" in Chinese term, the Facebook post of the Yoshinoya branch appeared to make fun of the police by demanding people stop calling their fish-based product "lion dog".

The post received much support from the general public, but it also agitated the management of Yoshinoya Hong Kong. The CEO of the Hong Kong franchisee commanded the retreat of the post immediately and made an official apology in an interview published a few days later by a state-owned newspaper in Hong Kong considered close to the mainland Chinese government. He also confirmed that the PR agency and responsible staff involved with the release of that post were sacked. It was believed that such acts were opted for to avoid offending the bigger market in mainland China. However, this decision caused some rampant responses from the yellow-ribbon camp. People in Hong Kong, mainly the youth, started to attack Yoshinoya online, with nearly every social media action taken by Yoshinoya being instantly attacked online. The yellow-ribbon camp also started to boycott and damage its restaurants on and after October 1, 2019, which caused the company numerous crises and significant losses in the Hong Kong market.

3. Purpose of study

The Hong Kong social unrest, which stemmed from the extradition bill protest in 2019, caused massive effects on businesses and society and created conflicts between pro-Beijing (i.e., the blue-ribbon camp) and pro-democracy (i.e., the yellow-ribbon) advocates. In particular, the Maxim's group and Yoshinoya Hong Kong, two of the largest food and catering firms in Hong Kong, became main targets of protesters who looked at them as blue-ribbon shops. This case was situated in a highly polarized context (i.e., pro-Beijing vs. pro-democracy) and triggered intense talk on social media. By using these online discussions as our research context, we revisit contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997) in relation to the regenerative crisis model that guides the study of the communication between Maxim's and Yoshinoya and their online active publics, as well as the interaction of the publics among themselves (Coombs, 2017) respectively. This work also explicates how contingent factors change and shape the dynamics of crisis responses along the regenerative crisis lifecycle.

4. Literature review

4.1. Social-mediated crisis of regenerative nature

The development of internet-based technologies has meaningfully affected how organizations communicate with their publics, especially the paths chosen by organizations to respond to conflicts and crises. The ways crisis information spreads among publics are indeed increasingly influenced and changed by interactive digital platforms, such as social media.

However, social media is considered a "double-edged sword" for crisis communication. On one hand, it in fact enables organizations to deliver information and collect opinions from publics more effectively (Jin & Liu, 2010; Stieglitz et al., 2017). On the other hand, though, the participatory nature of social media tends to empower its users, which can more easily share opinions, comments, and emotions (and amplify their reach). The activism enabled by social media causes PR managers to lose control over the management of crisis situations, especially when these are generated by or affected by user-generated actions (Liu, Jin, Austin, & Janoske, 2012; Mak & Ao, 2019). Sometimes, the empowered

publics identify in-group and out-group others based on ideologies, and this may lead them to adopt trolling behaviors on social media, such as posting provocative and offensive messages to vent negative emotions, gain attention, or create conflicts (Bishop, 2013; Hardaker, 2013). As a result, stakeholders' opinions shared online have become a key component in social-mediated crisis communication.

To address the unique characteristics of crisis communication on social media, PR scholars have developed several theories. For instance, the Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model suggests that when a crisis response message is sent out on traditional or social media channels is as influential as the content of the message (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Moreover, it also indicates that both organizations and publics can influence the crisis situation, as it reveals how crisis information is processed between organizations and the publics on social media (Austin et al., 2012; Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012). Revisiting the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Coombs and Holladay (2012) adopted the concept of *paracrisis* to illustrate how social-mediated crises are generated. They explained that organizational risks that can be seen on social media may turn to be real crises because of publics' attitudes and emotions. According to the paracrisis perspective, organizations are suggested to pay attention to the long-term crisis management by monitoring social media information, as that would prevent paracrises from evolving into uncontrollable crises. Moreover, the power of social media users is also underlined in the studies that investigate "secondary crises." These works illustrate that, when publics share negative comments about organizations during crises, the spread of such negative comments in online publics' networks may cause another wave of negative word-of-mouth (i.e., secondary crises), a process that cannot be controlled by organizations (Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2018). In line with these theories, the unique characteristics of social-mediated crises include: 1) the dynamic nature of crisis situations and 2) the stronger role of publics on social media than in traditional channels. These features indicate that nowadays organizations face more difficulties in controlling the crisis situation with response strategies.

To learn more about today's mediated crises, Coombs (2017) proposed the *regenerative crisis model*. This model highlights that multiple sub-crises (or secondary crises) may occur at different stages of social-mediated crises due to various reasons. It also considers multiple growth stages of a crisis within a crisis lifecycle (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Coombs, 2017). As a result, several peaks can appear in the lifecycle of a regenerative crisis and each peak (or a sub-crisis) is triggered by certain events, which are known as *turning points*. There are many factors for each turning point – which mainly arise from the organizational response, the socio-political environment, and the types and actions of publics (Mak & Ao, 2019) – some of which are powerful enough to make crisis situations change. In the polarized context, publics are increasingly active to communicate on the internet about crises, sharing opinions with like-minded others, and engaging in debates with adversarial people (Ao & Mak, 2021; Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). The regenerative nature of a social-mediated crisis becomes more prominent and it growingly affects how PR professionals adopt responsive strategies and contingent stances along the lifecycle.

4.2. Contingency theory and factors

In the field of crisis communication, many social media-based theories have been influenced by the propositions or variables of contingency theory. For instance, based on the SMCC model, Jin, Liu and Austin (2014) adopted publics' acceptance of the accommodative strategy as a result of the form and source of organizational crisis response. By building on contingency theory, Coombs and Holladay (2012) argued that a paracrisis should be handled before it turns into a real crisis, underlining that a long-term risk brings more damage to organizations than a short-term one. When dealing with a crisis, organizations usually move their stances along a continuum which depends on

circumstances (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2021; Pang, Jin, Kim, & Cameron, 2020), which makes a crisis lifecycle a dynamic and ongoing process in strategic crisis management. The dynamic process between organizations and publics indeed requires organizations to adopt timely and appropriate response stances to address changing crisis situations (Coombs, 2017). While most of these theories mainly focus on explicating the crisis situation and stakeholders' influence, they do not offer suggestions regarding how organizations can deal with the crisis. Therefore, given the dynamic and regenerative nature of today's online crises, contingency theory of accommodation is worth being reconsidered as a lens to investigate how organizations can respond to social-mediated crises.

The contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997) has been widely used in PR research on strategic thinking (Qiu & Cameron, 2007; Waters, 2013), which has focused on the "contingent" perspective to understand "what enables the organization to change and what causes the changes to occur in relationships" (Cheng & Cameron, 2019, p. 690). As identified by Cancel et al. (1997), though, one major limitation of the four models of PR (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) was that no strong correlation was found between what factors would lead to which of the four models under different situations. Therefore, Cancel et al. (1997) further integrated the four models and elaborated more on the theory suggesting that PR is a choice of different stances in a continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation. Advocacy could be interpreted as a form of asymmetric communication, while accommodation corresponds to symmetric communication. Thus, advocacy and accommodation form the two extremes of the continuum of PR practice, which features numerous discrete stances, positions, and strategies to handle different publics and situations (Cancel et al., 1997). The contingency theory proposes that a) the crisis situation changes through a dynamic process, b) the response of organizations should also be dynamic, and c) organizations should adopt the most appropriate PR practice by considering the contingent factors of a crisis (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Cancel et al., 1997; Cheng, 2016; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Pang, Jin, Kim, and Cameron (2020) indicated that organizations often choose *do nothing* as a response stance – in the middle of the advocacy-accommodation continuum. However, most previous studies focused primarily on advocacy and accommodation stances and ignored what contingent factors led organizations to choose do nothing (Lee et al., 2022; Mei et al., 2010). This study selects two cases that the organizations adopted the do nothing stance and explored the factors influencing their responses.

Initially, the theory suggested 87 internal and external contingent factors – which organizations could assess to determine stances and strategies to communicate with publics – and divided them into internal (five groups) and external (six groups) variables (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). Then, Cancel et al. (1999) redefined the contingent factors into *predisposing variables* and *situational variables*. Predisposing variables were defined as the contingent variables that had greater effects in shaping and maintaining the disposition of an organization, i.e., those variables more influential in determining the stance to take for the PR practice. Situational variables were instead constituted by the specific changing dynamics that depended on the issue under question. The situational variables were proposed as to have more influence on the alteration of the stances because of the interplay between organizations and their publics. Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2021) called for strategic assessment of *the nature of publics* as contingent factors, especially in the context that publics are significantly empowered by social media. This study will answer this call by investigating contingent factors concerning external social media publics. Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2012) further enumerated the dimensionality of threats such as duration, severity, and type. The understanding of impact of different contingency factors in crisis management was more explicitly emphasized as critical for organizations (Pang et al., 2020; Pang et al., 2021). Overall, contingency theory proposes that the investigation of contingent factors can allow PR practitioners to study the dynamics of

crises and determine what stance should be taken within the pure advocacy – pure accommodation continuum.

The contingency theory has been applied to crisis communication in various contexts. Early studies mostly examined how PR determined response stances in the advocacy-accommodation continuum by considering the level of contingent factors and the effects of responses (Hwang & Cameron, 2008; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin et al., 2006). Yet, given the dynamic nature of crises and the continuous advancement of communication technologies, scholars have begun to commit to refine contingent factors to best capture the changing crisis situations. Scholars maintain that contingent factors are variable. For instance, Shin and Cameron (2003) interviewed about 400 PR practitioners to identify what factors affected their PR practice. This study generated 12 additional groups of contingent factors. Mei et al. (2010), instead, developed a model about the influence of new media in crisis communication and suggested factors and actions that should be considered by organizations at different stages of the crisis. Pang and his colleagues (2020; 2021) took the perspective of strategic conflict management for contingency theory and this led to the *factor-position-strategy model*. This model could be considered as an expansion of the contingency theory leading a primarily PR theory to a theory for strategic conflict management. When a crisis was considered as a conflict, there would be antagonistic positions which were to put the organization in a favorably position within the conflict. It is worth-noting that some conflicts can be resolved, while some escalate to crises (Pang et al., 2020; Pang et al., 2021). A polarized context with publics holding antagonistic positions creates a unique situation for crisis communication. Previous studies adopting contingency theory did not investigate how to select the response stance in this context. To fill this gap, this study analyzes how the studied organizations responded to crises in a polarized context, and what factors influence their stances.

The investigation of the links between crises and social media were also explored in the study by Cheng (2016). By longitudinally investigating stances and strategies adopted by the Red Cross Society of China in tackling its online crisis with Guo Mei Mei, a local online celebrity, this study suggested that handling crises on the internet required various responsive actions from organizations. Organizations were also recommended to adopt more than a single strategy during a crisis lifecycle. Cheng (2016) also identified several new contingent factors, e.g., the powerful public-led agenda, the heavily censored media landscape, and the low trust of China society, which were proposed as key variables to better address the unique situation of internet-mediated crises.

Cheng's (2016) study constitutes a good starting point in the use of contingency theory to understand social-mediated crisis. However, because of the case selection and the longitudinal analysis approach adopted in Cheng's (2016) work, more studies appear necessary to reveal how organizations should react to the dynamic crisis situations within the lifecycle. Cheng's (2016) case study, in fact, happened in 2011, that is, when social media platforms were not very popular in mainland China – which makes that crisis event not as participatory as current social-mediated crises. Additionally, Cheng (2016) fell short to address the dynamism of the crisis process. Specifically, Cheng's (2016) study showed how contingent factors led to different response strategies but overlooked factors and strategies as the crisis situation evolved. Hence, considering the regenerative nature of today's social-mediated crises – which are strongly influenced by the socio-political contexts and the participatory character of social media – how and why organizations take certain response stances and strategies calls for further exploration (Mak & Ao, 2019). Therefore, two research questions are posited accordingly.

RQ1:. What stances and strategies did the selected organizations choose in the advocacy-accommodation continuum in response to their regenerative social-mediated crises correspondingly?

RQ2:. What contingent factors impacted the selected organizations' stances in the regenerative social-mediated crises respectively?
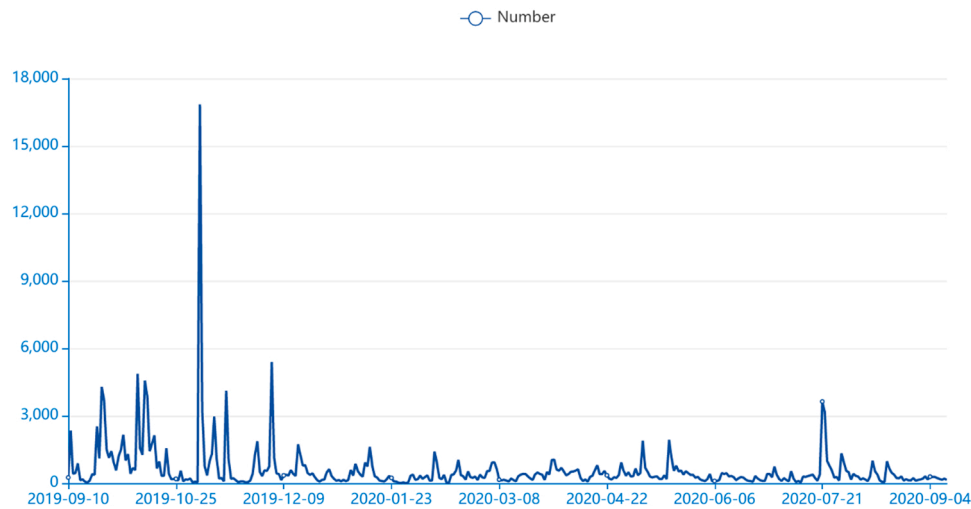
Fig. 1. Facebook coverage of the Maxim's crisis.

5. Method

5.1. Data collection

This study adopts a case study approach by using online data since both cases were escalated, heated, and widely spread on the social media. This method was chosen to define and examine the characteristics of the stances taken by both organizations and their publics, and the factors that shaped their respective stances (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). By considering Facebook pages, this study used DivoMiner, an online data acquisition and analysis tool, to capture a total of 3836 posts and 237,665 comments concerning the crisis affecting Maxim's, and a total of 1651 Facebook posts and 57,461 comments regarding the Yoshinoya's crisis. DivoMiner has been widely adopted by scholars to collect data and analyze Chinese posts and comments from social media platforms (see Chang, Schulz, Jiao, & Liu, 2021; Gao et al., 2022; Guo & Wang, 2021; Mak & Ao, 2019; Zhou, Zhang, Cai, & Cao, 2021). For the Maxim's case, we first searched by keywords and considered the period from September 10, 2019 to September 10, 2020. "Maxim's group" (searched with its Chinese company name), its major sub-brands (e.g., "Maxim's bakery," "Arome Bakery," and "Jade Garden"), and the names of renowned brands such as "Starbucks Coffee" and "Genki Sushi" (licensees), were inputted in DivoMiner to automatically extract relevant posts and comments from online platforms. As for the Yoshinoya case, searched keywords were both the Chinese and English versions of the company name, and the period was from July 9, 2019 to July 8, 2020. We identified both simplified and traditional Chinese texts relevant for this study. To better understand the background of the cases, this study also used DivoMiner to extract online news articles with objective facts about the two cases from 30 credible Hong Kong media websites for the analysis. After manually removing irrelevant articles such as those only with photos or videos and duplicated news content, 285 articles about the Maxim's case and 178 articles about the Yoshinoya case were collected.

5.2. Data analysis

To answer RQ1, all the response information released by the two organizations, including their official Facebook pages, Facebook pages of their management staff, and online news articles that forwarded organizational responses from other communicative channels, were extracted and analyzed. Based on the types of responses by Maxim's and Yoshinoya, the authors identified their strategies and stances according to the definitions provided by prior studies (for strategies, see Coombs, 2007 and Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2009; for stances, see Cheng, 2018 and

Pang et al., 2021).

To answer RQ2, this study coded several categories of contingent factors proposed by Coombs (2007) and Pang et al. (2021), excluding factors that were not applicable or could not be identified in the two selected cases: first, the organizational, PR departmental, and top management individual characteristics, including localization, age of the organization, and past experience with pro-Beijing/pro-democracy publics, etc., were coded using public online information and organizational websites; second, the internal threats, including economic gain and loss, political stances of top management, and communication patterns of employees or formal employees, were coded by public online information; and third, the environment and characteristics of external publics, including ideological barriers between organization and publics, perceived gain or loss for taking pro-Beijing/pro-democracy stances, and social media information overload, etc., were coded based on online public materials, online news articles, and representative Facebook posts and comments. This study adopted an inductive coding approach, which means we derived codes of contingent factors from the data, new items can be developed during coding (Boyatzis, 1998). The final coding scheme can be seen in Appendix A. Factors that were found to be influential on how organizations selected response stances were presented in the Findings section.

The data was coded inductively by two ~~trained~~ coders, through analyzing definitions of each response strategy, stance, and contingent factor. Posts and comments that did not concern the crisis (e.g., advertising, blank posts) were removed from analysis. The data cleaning was conducted by the two researchers manually after the automatic data extraction. The two coders went through the initial training materials together to discuss and develop the coding scheme. For organizational response posts, public online materials and organizational websites, two coders co-coded the data. For online news articles and Facebook posts/comments, 10% of them (45 articles, 20 posts, and 20 comments) were randomly selected for inter-coder reliability test. The Cohen's Kappa coefficients of three coded items (i.e., *Ideological barriers between organization and publics, Gain or loss – pro-Beijing, and Gain or loss – pro-democracy*) were 1.00,.85,.73, which reached acceptable or perfect levels.

To identify the emotional social environment, a machine-based coding sentiment analysis was also conducted on DivoMiner in order to generate the valence of the public emotions of the two cases for our analysis. According to a pilot test of Facebook posts and comments conducted by the research designer of DivoMiner and some academic studies (e.g., Ma & Zheng, 2021), the accuracy of the machine-based sentiment analysis reached 70–90%.
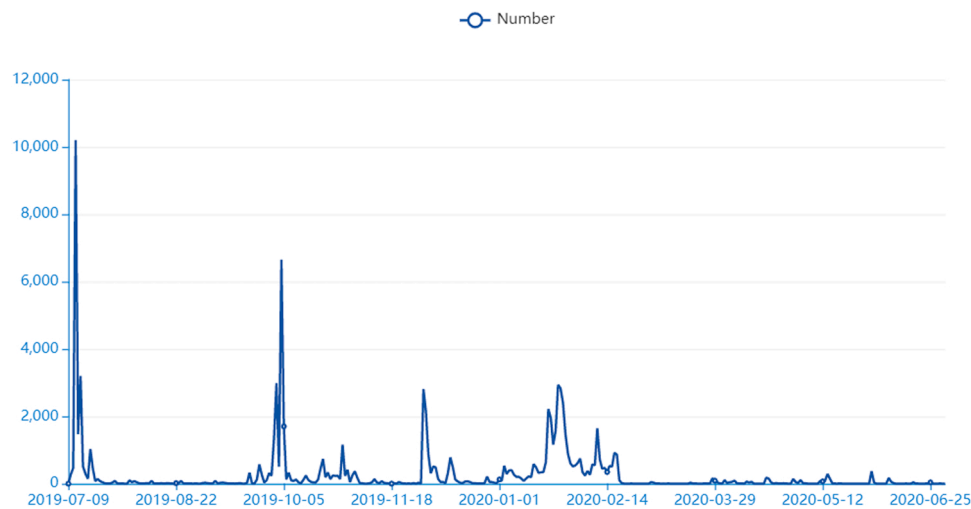
Fig. 2. Facebook coverage of the Yoshinoya crisis.

6. Findings

6.1. Stances and strategies taken by Maxim's and Yoshinoya in the regenerative crisis

RQ1 asked what stances and strategies the two selected organizations chose to adopt during the regenerative crisis. We first identified the timeline and lifecycle of the crises, then analyzed how the organizations responded to their external publics at different stages. Figs. 1 and 2 indicated that these crises followed the regenerative lifecycle in which the situations kept changing along the study period, and multiple Facebook coverage peaks were identified. In the Maxim's case, six peaks were detected respectively on September 24, October 9, November 4, November 15, and December 4, 2019, as well as July 21, 2020. In the Yoshinoya case, peaks were identified on July 12, July 14, July 18, October 2, and December 12, 2019. Each peak can be regarded as the result of a certain event relevant to the crisis, e.g., organizational response, information release from the government, publics' protests, or release of media news reports.

In the Maxim's crisis, initially the organization adopted a relatively *advocacy stance* by announcing that Annie Wu was no longer a corporate member, even though she is the daughter of the company's founder. The response corresponded to the *excuse strategy* proposed by Coombs (2007), which suggested that the organization was not able to control Annie Wu's statements since she no longer was a member of the company. The excuse strategy has been usually considered as relatively advocacy (Cheng, 2018; Pang et al., 2009). Released on September 24, 2019, the announcement created the first peak of Facebook coverage. This announcement was also the only response made by Maxim's throughout the regenerative crisis lifecycle. The statement however did not address issues the publics seemed to be actually interested in (i.e., organizational attitudes toward the protest) (see Table 1). In the Yoshinoya case, the organization adopted a relatively *accommodative stance* at the beginning, by deleting the Facebook post, claiming they had canceled the cooperation with the advertising company and fired the employee who was responsible for the creation of the post content. What Yoshinoya did can be regarded as a *corrective action strategy*, which was close to the accommodative end of the beforehand presented continuum (Coombs, 1998; Pang et al., 2009). Yoshinoya's response was strongly criticized by the public and triggered a peak of Facebook coverage on July 12, 2019.

Because of the diverse nature of involved publics, following either pure advocacy or accommodation might not be enough to address the stances taken by organizations. In fact, the discussion on the Hong Kong social media was dominated by pro-Beijing and pro-democracy active publics, which were both involved in polarized crises. Therefore, this is an example in which organizations are increasingly facing challenges to respond to publics with opposing stances and different perceptions of the crisis situations. In this regard, advocative or accommodative responses to one group were also visible and perceived differently by the other group. For instance, Maxim's advocative response was considered as accommodating the stances of pro-Beijing publics, yet attacked by pro-democracy publics (e.g., comments like "please go back to China!"). As for Yoshinoya, its accommodative response to the pro-Beijing group was also regarded as offensive by pro-democracy publics (e.g., comments like "CCP's company!"). In such a polarized context, organizations are thus forced to carefully prioritize and select the targeted publics when discussing organizational response stances.

The initial responses in both cases were ineffective. For example, after releasing the announcement, Maxim's shops were still attacked by protesters because the company's advocative response to pro-democracy publics provoked the audience. Yoshinoya attempted to adopt another accommodative stance towards the pro-democracy publics by stating that no one was fired, yet it did not receive positive feedback. After that, the stances of both organizations turned to *avoidance*. Notwithstanding numerous attacks caused by their initial responses continued both offline and online, Maxim's and Yoshinoya did not directly respond to the crises any longer.

6.2. Contingent factors shaping organizational stances and strategies

6.2.1. Internal factors

This study first coded the organizational characteristics as contingent factors by analyzing the background of the two organizations. Results showed that *past experience with external publics*, *political stances of top management, economic loss or gain*, and *the ways employees and former employees release information* were foud contingent factors adapted from Pang et al. (2021) that influenced organizational choices for response stances. First, Maxim's founders were born in mainland, and the company has long cooperated with mainland Chinese companies (e.g., the Beijing Air Catering Co., Ltd. is a joint venture created in 1980 with a Chinese state-owned company). Marvin Hung, the CEO of Yoshinoya Hong Kong, was a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which largely associates with a highly pro-Beijing stance. Past studies suggested that publics consider *history* to be relevant to the crisis when evaluating the crisis situation. This was reflected in the fact that protesters tended to label the two organizations as pro-Beijing businesses (i.e., "blue shops") and in the fact that past experience with mainland China led both organizations to take relatively pro-Beijing decisions (Cancel et al., 1999;
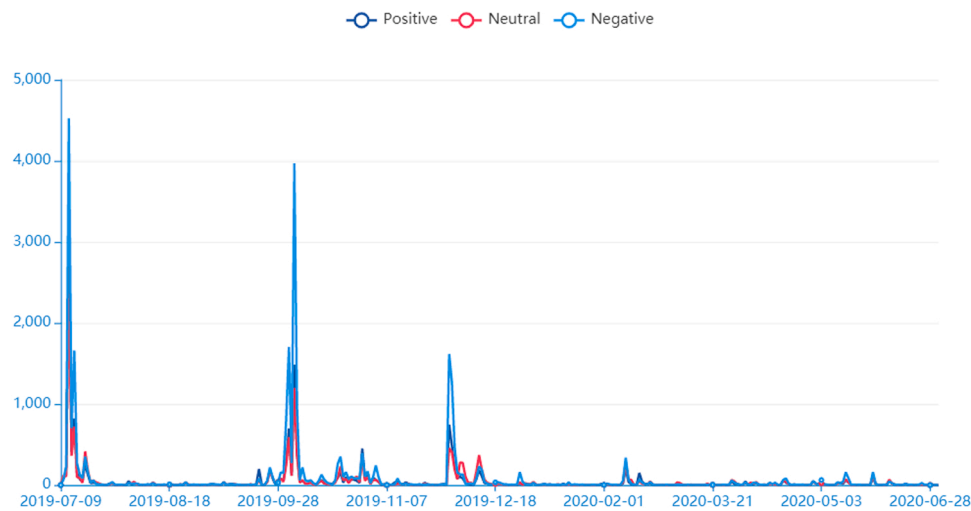
Fig. 3. Sentiment analysis of the Yoshinoya crisis.

Coombs, 2004). Specifically, cooperating with state-owned companies led Maxim's to advocate to pro-democracy, while the CPPCC background of its CEO brought Yoshinoya to accommodate the stances of pro-Beijing publics.

Second, mainland China is a vital market for both organizations. In 2020, Maxim's and Yoshinoya had respectively around 200 and 600 outlets and restaurants in mainland. The literature suggests that, when responding to a crisis, most organizations tend to avoid economic losses (Cancel et al., 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2014). Accordingly, during their crises, both organizations might have been unwilling to move their stances to the pro-democracy side because doing so may have provoked reactions from mainland publics, thereby causing significant losses in the mainland Chinese market. The attempt to maintain economic gains from both the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong markets could thus explain why Maxim's and Yoshinoya eventually chose the avoidance stance by not responding to both groups.

The third factor concerned *the ways employees and former employees released information.* In a polarized context, social media users are rather sensitive to the political stances taken by organizations (Buder, Rabl, Feiks, Badermann, & Zurstiege, 2021; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). On social media platforms, opinions publicly expressed by corporate employees can be regarded as information representing their organizations (Lee, Cho, Sun, & Li, 2020; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). The publicly released information of employees can either enhance or impair organizational reputation (depending on its content), which requires organizational attention (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Opgenhaffen & Claeys, 2017). Because of the impacts of employees' public statements, although organizations have a hard time to control how employees release information, they should still take it into consideration when responding to a crisis. In the Maxim's case, the crisis was triggered by the political expressions of its former member (i.e., Annie Wu), who, despite having recently retired and thus not serving as a corporate member during the crisis, was still conceived as an organizational member and a representative of the company. Given the personal pro-Beijing stance and the continuous information release by Annie Wu, Maxim's was not able to accommodate with the pro-democracy side and had to take an excuse strategy to control the damage by severing relations with her. However, because of her background, most news media still connected Annie Wu with Maxim's to increase readership. For example, on November 4, 2019, the Hong Kong Economic Journal released an article framing her as "the daughter of Maxim's founder," which gained around 6400 comments and more than 10,000 shares. Thus, Maxim's excuse strategy did not work at the end.

6.2.2. External factors

Cancel et al. (1999) reported important contingent factors concerning external social and political environments. In today's Hong Kong, the environment that orients organizational choices in crisis communication is a polarized social context. Such a context features two parties with opposite ideologies and stances, where party membership determines identification with others from the same group and people are often aggressive toward the members of opposite parties (Gentzkow, 2016). For a crisis involving a conflict, both parties would consider the crisis as an issue to declare their stances. In the case of Hong Kong, this means that the crises can be regarded as sub-crises of the anti-extradition bill protest, that is to say that the crises originated and were sustained by socio-political conflicts that were not controllable by the organizations. For example, in early October in 2019, protesters organized offline attacks against Maxim's and Yoshinoya stores that followed the National Day of mainland China and the enactment of the law that forbade people to wear facemasks. This showed that the crises were not merely "organizational." Attacking the companies was indeed a symbolic action by which protesters expressed their anti-mainland and anti-government stances.

In this polarized context, three contingent factors were identified, with two of them being adapted from Pang et al. (2021). These were respectively the *ideological barriers between organization and publics* and the *potential rewards or losses using different strategies with external publics*, while the third one (i.e., *social-mediated crisis information overload*) was newly developed from analyzing the two cases. First, polarized social media publics are divided by ideological differences, with barriers existing not only between organizations and publics but also between different groups of the publics (Spohr, 2017). For instance, in the Maxim's case, publics expressed negative comments toward not only the organization, but also to those holding opposing stances (e.g., "Old/-Young TRASH!"). When responding to publics, organizations should consider the ideological barriers since polarized people are irrational, which means that they only accept like-minded information and are negative toward the opposing group (Ao & Mak, 2021; Buder et al., 2021; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Therefore, clarifying organizational political stance in response (either pro-Beijing or pro-democracy) would indeed aggravate the rapport with the publics supporting the other stance. Negative comments of online active publics may turn more aware publics into active publics and regenerate secondary crises for organizations (Austin et al., 2012). In the Lancôme and Denise Ho's crisis in 2016, the organization's accommodative stance with pro-Beijing publics caused negative emotions from pro-democracy publics (Mak & Ao, 2019). This factor may explain why Maxim's adopted the advocacy stance and claimed that it had no relations with

Annie Wu, as it first attempted to avoid supporting either pro-Beijing or pro-democracy stances. However, because of its inherent connection with Annie Wu, the advocacy stance did not work well. Pro-democracy publics required Maxim's to proclaim its support for the protest, otherwise it would still be considered as a pro-Beijing organization and continue to be object of attacks.

Second, determining response stances should consider gains or losses relevant to external publics, which requires understandings of such publics (Pang et al., 2021). External publics could generate financial (through boycott) and reputational (through negative WOM) losses during a crisis (Hunter, Le Menestrel, & de Bettignies, 2008; Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017). Since the social media environment was polarized in this study, which means most people were emotional, holding opposing viewpoints, and actively engaging in adversarial debates (Buder et al., 2021; Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019), both pro-Beijing and pro-democracy publics were capable of triggering financial and reputational losses.

A sentiment analysis showed the emotional valence of each post (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral) in the Yoshinoya case. Facebook users' attitudes towards the crisis were mostly negative. 47.82% (n = 27,477) posts and comments expressed negative attitudes, while 26.01% (n = 14,943) were neutral and 26.18% (n = 15,041) were positive. Negative comments included "Get out of Hong Kong!", "I will never go to Yoshinoya anymore", and "Go back to China, where is good for unethical businessmen like you!" Peaks of publics' emotions can be seen in Fig. 3, which displays the trendline of the Facebook coverage. In other words, negative WOM of Yoshinoya were identified at each peak of Facebook coverage.

Beyond Facebook, Yoshinoya's original Facebook post mocking the Hong Kong police quickly generated thousands of posts and comments on Weibo (the most salient mainland Chinese social media), which involved state-owned media (e.g., *Global Times*) and influencers (e.g., Guancha Syndicate). The comments mostly called for boycott and expressed negative emotions (e.g., "Hope your company die with Hong Kong together!"). The strong negative comments by social media publics caused significant reputational damage for the organization.

Besides negative comments on social media, offline protests and attacks also caused financial losses. On November 15, 2019, a news article about the constant attacks of protesters to Maxim's stores was released, indicating that 71 of Maxim's stores were shut down because of the protest. According to an article of *Ming Pao Daily* on June 1, 2020, 10 of Yoshinoya stores were closed down during the social unrest, with other stores being also behind with their rent payments. The offline attacks caused more negative online environments. For instance, many protesters on Facebook viewed the temporary closure of Maxim's stores as an indicator of their successful riots (e.g., "there are still some stores open, we should keep doing this"). In other words, the reputational and financial losses would exacerbate each other.

As potential losses can be caused by external publics, organizations should develop corresponding strategies and stances to respond (Coombs, 2007; Pang et al., 2010). However, publics in polarized contexts usually involve two groups of people with opposing ideologies, which makes the assessment of potential gains and losses more complicated: Indeed, gains from one group might lead to losses from the other group. For instance, the decision taken by Yoshinoya to fire the responsible employee generated positive comments from pro-Beijing

Fig. 4. Advocacy-accommodation continuum in a polarized context.

people, but significantly provoked pro-democracy publics. The two selected companies attempted to solve the dilemma of responding to two groups. Maxim's did that by trying to sever the relations with the crisis, while Yoshinoya changed its stance during the crisis, firstly by accommodating the pro-Beijing stances then attempting to recuperating the relationships with the pro-democracy publics. Both the excuse and "accommodating with both groups" strategies were found to be ineffective to eliminate online and offline losses. Yoshinoya's response, in particular, ended up exasperating both groups. Then, the two companies chose not to respond to the crises anymore, to avoid provoking any groups within the polarized publics. Previous studies found that the "no comment" stance was acceptable in the Asian context, which provided rationale for the choices of Maxim's and Yoshinoya (Lee, 2004).

The last situational contingent factor was the nature of social-mediated crisis, which is also known with the concept of *information overload*. As underlined by Rodriguez et al. (2014), people receive endless information on social media, which sometimes exceeds their cognitive abilities to maintain attention and process the information. Thus, their interests and focuses may easily be changed (Feng et al., 2015; Sadiku, Shadare, & Musa, 1999). For instance, in Hong Kong, besides Maxim and Yoshinoya, there were also many global and local companies, e.g., Television Broadcasts Limited (a well-known Hong Kong TV station), TaiPan (a famous Hong Kong bakery), and Pocari Sweat (a global drink company), which were also in the media spotlight. These organizations faced social-mediated crises with heated discussion and were involved in the social unrest turmoil as well. Expecting Facebook publics' attention to turn to those other issues and crises was thus reasonable for the two organizations, which supported their choice for an avoidance stance that, consisting of not responding, might have eliminated the influence of the crisis.

7. Discussion

This study examined the contingency theory in a polarized context. By analyzing the case information and Facebook data, this study revealed the stances and strategies undertaken by two companies that were perceived as pro-Beijing organizations, and the contingent factors that influenced the choice of their stances during a social-mediated crisis of regenerative nature.

7.1. Theoretical implications for the advocacy-accommodation continuum

Our findings supported the basic idea of contingency theory and the dynamic nature of crises (Pang et al., 2010). Following a regenerative lifecycle, both cases contained manifold sub-events, had multiple crisis foci, and reached multiple discussion peaks on social media. Furthermore, instead of simply adopting one response strategy, the organizations switched their response stance resulting from evaluating the predominant internal and external contingent factors, which supported the dynamic pattern of crisis communication. This finding resonates with the proposition of the contingency theory that suggests that, to avoid hidden minefields, an organization should take some time to carefully consider both situational and proscriptive factors when reacting to a crisis (Pang et al., 2021). In real-life cases, situational (e.g., social media publics' requirements, emotions, and new trigger events) and proscriptive (e.g., regulations) factors can always evolve during a crisis, which requires organizations to sometimes re-evaluate the factors to make corresponding decisions. In doing that, a dynamic and regenerative crisis nature is created.

The polarized context challenges crisis communication by requiring PR practitioners to consider more contextual factors. In such a context, organizations should respond to groups of people that concomitantly hold opposing social or political stances. However, the two case studies illustrated that sometimes both groups of polarized publics would require the crisis-involved organizations to support their own stances. In
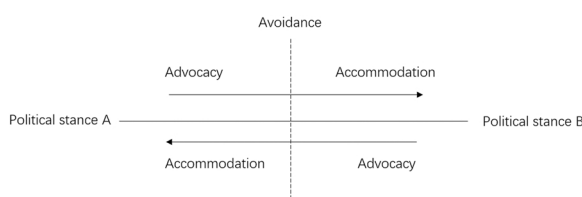
those cases, organizations cannot simply respond to publics by taking advocative or accommodative stances, because being accommodative/advocative to one group would be considered as advocating/accommodating with the group holding opposing stances, and trigger losses driven by boycott, negative WOM, or emotional attack (Ao & Mak, 2021; Kirkwood, Payne, & Mazer, 2019). As for the features of the polarized context and the dilemmas that may emerge from there, we suggest refining the advocacy-accommodation continuum specific to the polarized context by taking the two opposing stances into consideration (see Fig. 4).

As previously mentioned, by evaluating contingent factors, an organization should *first* select a stand from both sides of the polarized political stances, then picking the advocative or accommodative responses along the crisis lifecycle. Selecting a response stance can be regarded as a dilemma. Evidence from the two cases showed that both groups of polarized publics required the organizations to clearly proclaim their political stances, which made it difficult for the organizations to choose an optimal stance. Satisfying the requirement from one group would indeed provoke the other group and cause relevant losses, which reflects the polarized context in Hong Kong (Lee, 2016). Thus, such "trade-off" should be carefully considered by organizations.

To address this dilemma, the two studied organizations adopted different strategies. Based on the analysis of the Maxim's case, this study unveils a *modest* stance, i.e., avoidance, which can be adopted by organizations in polarized contexts especially in the later stage of a crisis lifecycle. Avoidance is generally defined as "no comment" or "no response", and sometimes it is chosen in circumstances that no response appears to satisfy the expectations of each public. To minimize the risk of leading to intense conflicts, organizations have no choice but avoiding commenting on the crisis issues (Dignath et al., 2015; Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Seeger, 2006). Pang and his colleagues (2021) did not consider avoidance as a response stance, since it is technically not a "response." However, by analyzing the two cases, this study argues that "no response" or "avoidance" can be considered as a stance because of its unignorable role in the polarized context. In the Asian context, not directly responding to the crisis situation to avoid confrontation was sometimes used by organizations and accepted by their publics (Huang et al., 2005; Lee, 2004).

By walking the avoidance stance, organizations attempt to sever their relations with the crisis, or do not reply to any comment or release any announcement about the crisis until publics switch their attention to other issues. Evading relationships (neutrality vs. aggression between organizations and their publics) is consistent with the use of the avoidance stance. This relationship mode describes the status when one side wants to avoid responding while the other posts aggressive statements toward a common issue (Cheng & Cameron, 2019). For Maxim's, most publics took an aggression stance toward the organization because they held a different stance, while Maxim's took the neutrality stance and did not respond to the crisis focus (Annie Wu's interviews and statements) and diverge publics' interests (Cheng, 2020). In the Yoshinoya case, the company's responses resonated with the dynamic nature of crisis communication (Coombs, 2017; Pang et al., 2020), first by moving the corporate stance from accommodating with pro-Beijing to pro-democracy and eventually by adopting avoidance. This finding indicates that as a crisis evolves an organization may adjust its response stance by considering various contingent factors (Pang et al., 2021). Yet, when existing strategies do not work, organizations may have no choice but to pursue avoidance in order to minimize future losses. Future studies are encouraged to investigate effective strategies by which organizations respond to publics with opposing stances along the regenerative crisis lifecycle.

7.2. Theoretical implications for contingent factors

Results showed that the stances taken by the two selected organizations were determined by considering publics' factors from two groups with opposing stances. This finding extends the understanding of contingent factors for polarized contexts in relation to external publics, as it talks about a public's will to dilute its cause/request/claim and examines multiple groups involved in the crisis. Such observations contradict the traditional view of crisis communication theories according to which organizations should only respond to publics with similar interests and needs (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007).

Overall, the contingency theory has mostly been applied with a focus on the organizational side (e.g., Oyer & Karlis, 2016). However, social media has empowered publics, which requires contingent scholars to revisit the role of publics in crisis communication (Austin et al., 2012; Smith & Taylor, 2017). Instead of using data from PR practitioners' perceptions or experimental designs, this study analyzed publics' online comments and offline actions in real cases. Findings supported Cheng's (2016) new contingent factor of "powerful public-led agenda" and extended the reasoning on publics' power not only to the agenda, but also with regard to emotions, word-of-mouth, real support, and opposition actions. Moreover, this study also suggests that the contingent factor concerning the external environment (i.e., social support) should be understood through both online and offline levels (Cancel et al., 1999). In fact, the degree of social support, especially on the online level, is highly influenced and enlarged by powerful external publics.

This study emphasizes the importance of social media in the contingency theory. First, social media empowers publics to directly interact with organizations, to collectively voice their opinions, and to quickly escalate the crisis via negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Liu et al., 2012; Xiao, Hudders, Claeys, & Cauberghe, 2018). Such features give rise to external publics-related contingent factors because publics could easily generate financial and reputational losses (Cha, Suh, & Kim, 2015; Hegner, Beldad, & Kraesgenberg, 2016; Kim & Krishna, 2017). Second, the social media technology leads to online polarization. Online polarization is driven by the algorithm logic in social networks (Du & Gregory, 2016; Gillani, Yuan, Saveski, Vosoughi, & Roy, 2018). As much as user input (e.g., search terms, clicks, etc.) reflects their existing political preferences, the use of search engines may eventually lead to an information environment of like-minded people by personalized algorithms recommendations (Pariser, 2011). A selective exposure to information of similar opinions, ideologies, and political views, may elicit an "echo chamber" that only contains homogenous opinions, which can reflect and reinforce group members' opinions (Garrett, 2009), resulting in publics that continue to strengthen their pre-existing concepts and even ignore facts that prove their argument wrong (Bishop, 2008; Chan & Lee, 2014; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Third, social-mediated crisis information overload can be regarded as a *new* contingent factor, especially to decide upon the avoidance stance. Publics' attention span may be shortened by receiving too much information for long time (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Feng et al., 2015). In other words, by avoiding the discussion about the crisis, publics may lose their attention on the current crisis and crisis run time may decrease. This factor enriches the concept of *evading OPR* (Cheng & Cameron, 2019) and resonates with previous findings about companies that intentionally ignore online negative comments (Dekay, 2012; Thomas, Peters, Howell, & Robbins, 2012).

However, the overload of information on social media may also make social-mediated crises more regenerative and dynamic in nature. As a popular crisis-related topic is often believed to be easily replaced by other new hot topics on social media, avoiding direct conflicts with publics may resound as helpful to tune down the volume of the crisis on social media. Unfortunately, as information frequently overloads, social media can help associate other crisis events with an old crisis which would have died out long before, thus triggering further peaks in the crisis. This regenerative nature had been rather evident for our cases, especially the ineffectiveness of the avoidance stance. Attacks to the two organizations on social media surged again whenever there were incidents and issues relating to the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. To an
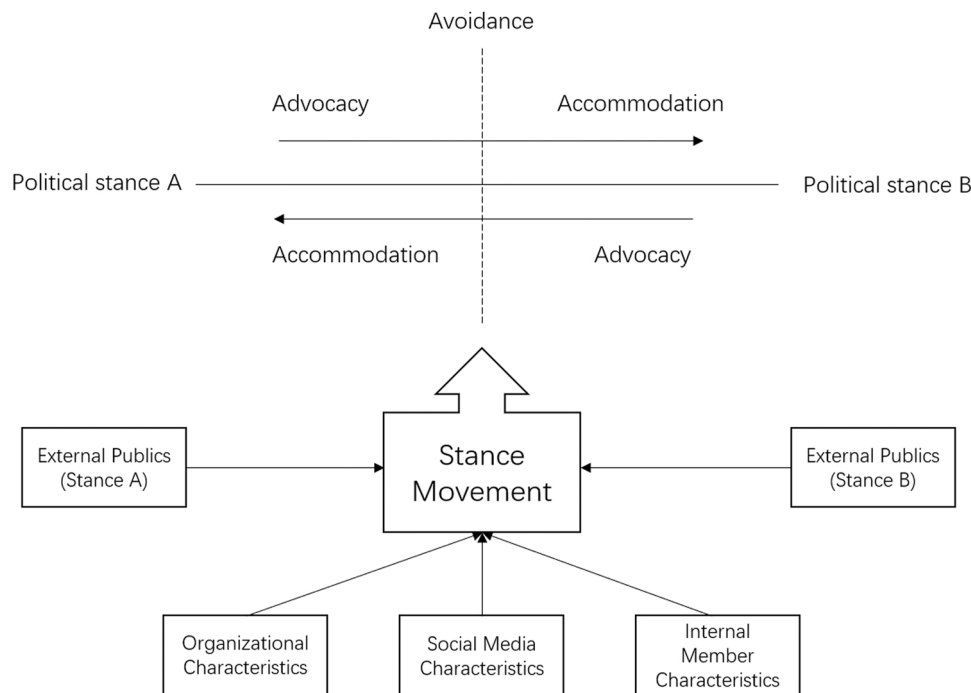
Avoidance

Advocacy   Accommodation

Political stance A ——————————————————————— Political stance B

Accommodation   Advocacy

Stance Movement

External Publics (Stance A) → Stance Movement ← External Publics (Stance B)

Organizational Characteristics   Social Media Characteristics   Internal Member Characteristics

Fig. 5. Proposed contingency model of strategic conflict management in polarized contexts.

extent, "Maxim's" and "Yoshinoya" were keywords for the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Therefore, on the one hand, organizations under social-mediated crises may choose the avoidance stance to tackle the crises due to the empowerment of the publics in the social media. However, on the other hand, due to the increased regenerative nature of crises, organizations adopting avoidance must keep a close monitoring of social media to proactively prepare for the next crisis peak. Put differently, organizations must always be prepared as crises are not likely to die out in a short time.

In this case study, the identified contingent factors that were significant to crisis communication in a polarized context included characteristics of *internal members*, *organization*, *social media*, and *external publics*, which are predisposing and, as such, should be considered before crisis communication. Most situational factors, especially those related to external publics, are dynamic and concerning two groups of people with opposing ideologies and needs, which should be adjusted during crisis communication (Pang et al., 2010; Pang et al., 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021). Gains from accepting requirements of one group may result in losses from the other group. Through this perspective, this study proposes to approach the organizational stance decision-making as a "push-and-pull" process, in which some factors may "push" the organization to move its stances to one end of the continuum, while other factors could "pull" it to the other end. In addition, a factor may have impacts of both "push" and "pull" as it contains two ends of power. Organizations would finally take a stance and reach a balance on the continuum (Pang et al., 2021), by evaluating the trade-off between "push" and "pull" power. During a crisis, the power of each contingent factor would change. For example, in the Maxim's case, the power of pro-democracy publics grew significantly stronger as Annie Wu's continued to deliver her opinions to the public. The changing power of contingent factors represents the dynamic nature of social-mediated crises and requires organizations to adjust their stances and strategies accordingly. Fig. 5 shows an example of strategic analysis of crisis communication in a polarized context.

8. Conclusion

In summary, our research provides insights to the contingency theory

for crisis communication in a specific social-mediated and polarized context. However, it is also limited by several factors. The first limitation relates to the adopted case study method. This study focused on the description of the case context and organizational behaviors, while statistical effects of contingent factors require testing by future research using quantitative data. Second, the avoidance stance is only a damage control response, rather than a problem-solving one. Hence, the effective response strategy to deal with crises in social-mediated, regenerative, and polarized contexts is still underexplored. Future studies are encouraged to investigate the effects of each stance taken by organizations in such a specific context. Third, the context of Hong Kong is characterized by specific cultural, historical, political, financial, and social factors. Our findings should thus be tested in regions with other cultures and socio-political environments.

Lastly, conclusions about situational factors for the contingent variables influencing social-mediated crises are not generalizable as this case study adopted a purposive sampling method. Political consumerism is found both in the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps and this case study only examined the behaviors and stances of publics of two companies from the food catering and restaurant industry. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study provides a contribution to the landscape of crisis communication in the age of social media and intense socio-political conflicts, acting as a significant starting point for future studies.

Declarations of interest

None.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Codebook

Variables	Items	Descriptors	Examples
Part 1: Basic information			
Coder		Coder (A/B)	
Crisis number	1. Maxim's 2. Yoshinoya		
Case feature	1. public online information 2. online article 3. Facebook posts and comments	Where each case comes from	
Part 2: Response stances and strategies			
Response stances and strategies	1. Strong advocacy (e.g. denial, attacker the accuser) 2. Relatively advocacy (e.g. excuse, good intention) 3. Relatively accommodation (e.g. remind) 4. Strong accommodation (e.g. apology, corrective action) 0. Do nothing	What stances were adopted by an organization 1. the organization adopted a strong advocacy stance, by asserting that there is no crisis or attacking the accusers. 2. the organization adopted a relatively advocacy stance, by partially accepting the responsibility but denying intent to do harm or claming inability to control the crisis. 3. the organization adopted a relatively accommodation stance, by accepting most responsibility but without apology or compensation. 4. the organization adopted a strong accommodation stance, by accepting full responsibility and conducting apology or compensation. 0. the organization does not respond to the crisis	1. "Our company was attacked by …" 2. "Annie Wu is no longer a member of our company …" 3. "We are sorry but we did not mean to …" 4. "We are sorry and the one who was responsible for the advertisement has been fired."
Part 3 : Organizational, PR departmental, and individual characteristics			
Localization	1. Global, centralized outside Hong Kong 2. Global, centralized at Hong Kong 3. Local	Whether an organization is global or local, and whether its headquarter is at Hong Kong	
Age of the organization		Age of an organization	
Past experience with publics – pro-Beijing/pro-democracy	1. Positive 2. Negative 3. No experience	Past experience with pro-Beijing/pro-democracy publics, including individuals and organizations. 1. the experience is positive 2. the experience is negative 3. no experience can be identified	1. economic cooperation, or publicly presenting pro-Beijing/pro-democracy stance 2. past protests
Part 4: Internal threats			
Economic gain	1. Economic gain from taking the pro-Beijing stance 2. Economic gain from taking the pro-democracy stance 0. No economic gain or loss can be identified	To what extent the organization economically gains from taking a certain political stance 1. Economic gain from taking the pro-Beijing stance 2. Economic gain from taking the pro-democracy stance 0: No economic gain or loss can be identified	1. Large mainland Chinese market 2. Large market concerning Hong Kong youths
Political stances of top management	1. Pro-Beijing; 2. Pro-democracy; 3. Both; 0. No political stances can be identified	What political values or stances do top management have of an organization. 1. pro-Beijing stance 2. pro-democracy 3. both stances were identified from different managers 0: No political stances were identified	1. Top management has a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) 2. Top management has a member of Hong Kong Pro-democracy camp 3. Top management has members of both CPPCC and Pro-democracy camp
Communication patterns of employees or former employees	1. Frequently release information 0. Unlikely to release information	Whether the employees or former employees were likely to release information about polarized socio-political issues or not 1. the employees or former employees frequently express opinions about polarized socio-political issues 0: the employees or former employees do not express opinions about polarized socio-political issues	1. Annie Wu expresses her political opinions a lot
Part 5: Environment and external publics			
Ideological barriers between organization and publics	1. Yes 2. No	Whether a post or comment showed a consistent or inconsistent political stance with the organization 1. the post or comment showed that the person held a different political stance with the organization 2. the post or comment showed that the person held a similar political stance with the organization	1. "The pro-Beijing people will support you, I quit." 2. "You have our 1.4 billion supporters! No worries!"
Gain or loss – pro-Beijing	1. Gain from taking the pro-Beijing stance 2. Loss from taking the pro-Beijing stance 0. No gain or loss can be identified	To what extent the organization economically or reputationally gains or losses from accommodating with pro-Beijing publics 1. Gaining benefits from accommodating with pro-Beijing publics 2. Losing benefits from accommodating with pro-Beijing publics 0: No gain or loss can be identified	1. "I support Hong Kong police, I support Maxim's." 2. Being attacked by pro-democracy protestors

(*continued*)

Variables	Items	Descriptors	Examples
Gain or loss – pro-democracy	1. Gain from taking the pro-democracy stance 2. Loss from taking the pro-democracy stance 0. No gain or loss can be identified	To what extent the organization economically or reputationally gains or losses from accommodating with pro- democracy publics 1. Gaining benefits from accommodating with pro-democracy publics 2. Losing benefits from accommodating with pro-democracy publics 0: No gain or loss can be identified	1. "Our Hong Kong people are proud of you, support you forever!" 2. Being boycotted by pro-Beijing people and mainland Chinese media
Social media information overload	1. Heavy information overload 2. Light information overload	Whether the crisis information concerning the polarized socio-political issue is too much on social media or not 1. the information is too much 2. the information is not too much	1. > 10 crises involving the polarized socio-political issue happened during the main time period of the two selected cases (i.e. July to November 2019) 2. < 10 crises involving the polarized socio-political issue happened during July to November 2019

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