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Original Research

Online Political Participation Under Government Surveillance: Focusing on the Post National Security Law Era in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Extensive scholarship has examined how government surveillance affects citizens' political participation, yet the mediating and moderating factors shaping this relationship remain insufficiently explored. This study investigates government-operated online surveillance in Hong Kong, a region that has experienced significant political transformation following the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. Through an online survey (N = 310), we examined how perceived surveillance influences online political participation of varying visibility levels, revealing a more complex picture than previously understood. While surveillance demonstrated pervasive chilling effects across both high-visibility and low-visibility activities, our path analyses uncovered distinct underlying mechanisms. Notably, fear emerged as a positive mediator between surveillance and political participation, actually stimulating citizens' expressive and information-seeking behaviors. Additionally, trust in digital platforms moderates surveillance's impact, particularly buffering its effects on low-visibility political activities. These findings contribute to surveillance studies by highlighting the dual nature of surveillance effects, where it simultaneously constrains and motivates political participation through distinct psychological mechanisms. Moreover, the study illuminates how digital platform characteristics and trust influence political activities online, offering insights into citizens' adaptive strategies under increasing surveillance pressure.

KEYWORDS

government surveillance, online political participation, fear, online privacy management, social trust, platform trust

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In June 2019, millions of citizens took to the streets to protest against the sudden implementation of the Hong Kong Extradition Bill, which threatened Hong Kong's legal system and its built-in safeguards (Wong & Kellogg, 2021). Following the escalated scale of protests, police violence, and violent clashes between police and protestors (F. L. Lee et al., 2019), the government withdrew the bill in September 2019

(Mak et al., 2024). However, the bill resurfaced with the enactment of a more stringent National Security Law (NSL) on 30 June 2020. The law mainly covers four types of offline and online acts – secession, subversion, terrorist activities, and collusion – which created vaguely defined political red lines (Datt, 2021). The government, in addition to the NSL, implemented various measures for oppressive online surveillance (Mak et al., 2024), such as allowing the law enforcement agency to monitor social media posts and the implementation of a reporting hotline for potential NSL cases. The law and the accompanying surveillance measures potentially limit and change citizens' political participation. The operation and wide use of a dedicated hotline and WeChat allow citizens to report potential online breaches of the NSL. By the end of 2022, the responsible department had received over 380,000 reports (Hong Kong Police Force, 2022), increasing individuals' fear of digital traces (Mak et al., 2024). As of January 31, 2024, 95 individuals have been arrested for speech crimes, while 29 have been arrested for posting content on social media with seditious intent and inflammatory conspiracy (ChinaFile, 2024). Owing to these surveillance measures, Hong Kong Twitter users were reported to be 247% more likely to delete tweets and less likely to talk about sensitive political topics on Twitter after the NSL implementation, preliminarily verifying that users now perceive the online platform as unsafe for expressing political opinions (M. Wang & Mayer, 2022).

The idea that government surveillance could constrain free expression and political association is not new (Penney, 2016). The literature on the effect of surveillance on online activism generally identifies two axes of effect – docility or resistance (Krueger, 2005) – in other words, backlash effects (Sullivan & Davenport, 2017). Focusing on surveillance and online speech, some studies have explored how surveillance represses individuals' willingness to speak (e.g., Oz & Yanik, 2022) and their online search activities (e.g., Marthews & Tucker, 2017). Others have suggested that chilling effects may not be uniform consequences of online surveillance; citizens may engage more proactively in protective (Chou & Chou, 2023) or resistant behaviors (Mann & Ferenbok, 2013). These ongoing debates imply that there might be underlying conditional processes involving moderators and mediators. Within this relationship, responses to surveillance largely depend on various individual factors, such as the level of fear regarding the consequences related to online surveillance (Büchi et al., 2022), and the fear of losing the core basic political rights (Wong & Kellogg, 2021). Social media's affordance within the surveilling online culture is also instrumental in affecting responses to surveillance. Social media platforms empower users to manage the visibility of their activities and to observe others' political acts (D. H. Kim & Ellison, 2022). In the digital realm, where everyone can monitor each other's online activities, users lack full control over the spread of the information they post on online platforms (Lyon, 2017). Thus, managing the visibility of shared posts and controlling self-disclosure levels becomes one of the most significant affordances of social media amidst surveillance. To respond to the affordance of visibility, individuals' online privacy management skills play a crucial role in determining the extent to which they can take control of their online footprints and understand the watchers. In a surveillance culture, one's trust in fellow netizens and the platforms they use also becomes more influential on individuals' sense of security and their decision to participate in online political activities.

As stated above, this study aims to understand online political participation under government surveillance, by examining factors that are particularly significant to the online environment. This study proposes that the level of fear experienced by individuals mediates the process by which surveillance may influence citizens'

political activism. It further suggests that online privacy management skills play a moderating role in mitigating this fear. As social and platform trust are crucial for establishing a trustworthy online environment conducive to individual participation in political activities, this study aims to investigate their moderating role in the relationship between government surveillance and political participation. Furthermore, this study explores how surveillance effects may differ depending on the visibility level of political activities online by conducting an online survey of citizens in Hong Kong, where the NSL and accompanying online surveillance measures had been enforced for several years.

Online Government Surveillance and Political Participation

While surveillance can be conducted by various entities, including friends, family, employers, police and governmental bodies (Kruse et al., 2018), this study specifically focuses on government-related aspects. Government surveillance on the Internet aims to induce obedience among individuals who are particularly resistant to the regime by instilling a sense of apprehension regarding the potential consequences of engaging in dissenting political activities online (Krueger, 2005). Some governments can track and analyze online activities and prosecute social media users who spread opposing views (Feldstein & Wong, 2020). Online surveillance involves gathering, storage, and examination of digital footprints by governmental bodies, with potential targets ranging from individuals to entire societies (Chan et al., 2024).

Researchers of political communication have regarded online surveillance as a significant area of study. Previous research has explored individuals' reactions and responses to surveillance, but has found inconsistent patterns (e.g., Krueger, 2005; Pan & Siegel, 2020; Stoycheff, 2016). Individuals alter their behaviors when they become aware of the presence of surveillance (Kruse et al., 2018). Docility and resistance are two general reactions to surveillance (Krueger, 2005). Regarding docility, by instilling fear and increasing the risk of participating, surveillance can "reduce individuals' propensity to dissent" (Hager & Krakowski, 2022, p. 565). Some studies have suggested that individuals' inclination to express themselves on online platforms may be curtailed because of government surveillance (e.g., Duffy & Chan, 2019; Oz & Yanik, 2022; Staples, 2013). One study targeting internet users in the US revealed that eighty percent of the respondents would be "much less likely" or "somewhat less likely" to speak or write about certain topics online and be more careful about what they say under government surveillance online, indicating the potential chilling effect on speech (Penney, 2017). When surveillance is recognized and internet users can communicate with each other while observing the watchers, resistance can arise (Krueger, 2005). The concept of a backlash effect (Sullivan & Davenport, 2017) finds support in decades of research on repression. For instance, Lemaire (2023) pointed out that a backlash effect is more likely to be evoked if the surveillance is too obvious and directly experienced by citizens (e.g., shutting down the whole social media platform).

The form and structure of a political regime play a crucial role in understanding the impact of government surveillance on online political participation. Individual responses to surveillance may vary significantly depending on several factors, including the level of political and media freedom, the prevailing political culture, and the robustness of civil society within a given context. A cross-national study by Kalmus et al. (2022) provides valuable insights into this complex relationship. The researchers examined individuals' responses to surveillance across three countries with distinct political histories: Estonia, Portugal, and Sweden, respectively. These nations were selected to represent past

totalitarian, authoritarian, and long-standing liberal democratic regimes, respectively. The study's findings revealed an intriguing pattern: in Portugal, where trust in state institutions and media is the lowest among the three countries, citizens exhibit the least tolerance for online state surveillance.

Despite these specific findings, it is crucial to note that citizens' reactions to surveillance demonstrate significant variability across countries with different regimes, with no consistent patterns emerging. The chilling effect can occur across different political systems. In repressive regimes like Russia, the government may cultivate an environment where citizens come to accept censorship and even view surveillance as beneficial (Nisbet et al., 2017). Meanwhile, in democratic states like the U.S., the 2013 revelation of government surveillance practices also led to a chilling effect on online search behavior (Marthews & Tucker, 2015).

Likewise, a backlash effect can arise under different regimes, even in authoritarian contexts (e.g., Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021; Pan & Siegel, 2020). In China, public outrage over the Green Dam Youth Escort filtering policy sparked protests that temporarily stopped its implementation, illustrating that even in repressive political environments, citizens will push back when their privacy and freedom are visibly harmed (Monggilo, 2016). Similarly, in Burundi, the disruption of WhatsApp led to a surge in the use of alternative tools to resist surveillance (Falisse & Nkengurutse, 2019).

These examples suggest that it is not the regime type that primarily shapes citizens' reactions to surveillance, but rather the visibility and direct impact of such measures. When surveillance is highly visible, and citizens feel its direct effects, backlash often follows. In the context of the Internet, government surveillance is more exposed, and online platforms offer citizens greater flexibility to resist repressive measures. This digital environment, which facilitates low-cost mobilization and participation, further contributes to backlash and more forms of online political acts against government repression (Pan & Siegel, 2020).

Any voluntary and nonprofessional activities concerning government, politics, or the state can be considered as political participation (Van Deth, 2014). The list of such participatory activities has become virtually infinite, including voting, demonstrating, contacting public officials, boycotting, posting blogs, volunteering, joining flash mobs, signing petitions and so forth (Van Deth, 2014). Scholars have classified types of political participation in various ways: individual vs. collective (e.g., Pattie et al., 2003); formal vs. extra-parliamentary (e.g, Ekman & Amnå, 2012); formal vs. informal (e.g., Jensen, 2013); institutional vs. non-institutional (e.g., Dalton, 2008); or online vs. offline (e.g., Oser et al., 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). While early empirical work on political participation tended to focus mostly on voting and election-related activities, various forms of digital platforms have widened the repertoire of participatory actions and measures of e-participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Social media platforms provide a domain of empowerment for youth, presenting novel avenues for them to express political dissent (A. Lee, 2018; Lemaire, 2023). New digital platforms provide citizens with low-cost routes to consume, produce, distribute, and comment on news and political information (Weeks et al., 2017). On the flip side, technologies have also been increasingly used by governments to monitor citizens' browsing behaviors and online communications as well as censor information that challenges governmental policies (Datt, 2021; A. Lee, 2018).

Visibility may be a crucial factor in investigating the impact of government surveillance on individuals' political participation in the online realm. Visibility in mediated communication is about "calling attention to something by showing it" (Dayan, 2013, p. 146). In general, the visible is something that can be seen and perceived

visually, while invisible is what cannot be seen, or is imperceptible or hidden from view (Thompson, 2005). In the digital world, individuals can make their political activities visible by uploading and distributing political content or leaving comments on existing resources. They can also engage in relatively invisible ways, such as reading news or consuming political content online, which allows them to access political information without revealing their identities. Together with benefiting from the visibility affordances of social media, individuals can observe others' political activities, which were once invisible, through social media feeds (D. H. Kim & Ellison, 2022). However, individuals have little control over how their information is distributed through the platform's interface (Thompson, 2005; Trottier, 2011). Posts or comments made online are visible worldwide, and various entities, including friends, family, employers, law enforcement agencies, and the platform itself (Trottier, 2011), collectively contribute to a virtual ecosystem of "imagined surveillance" (Duffy & Chan, 2019, p. 121). Consequently, these acts of scrutiny give rise to a new surveillance culture, integrating surveillance in everyday life (Lyon, 2017). The greater the visibility of one's online political activities, the higher the risk of exposure to online government surveillance.

Therefore, this study argues that the anonymity and publicity of political content that individuals publish or engage with are important factors to consider when participating in online political activities in a digital surveillance environment. Defining and categorizing visibility levels for online political participation may help develop a better understanding of the underlying mechanism between online political participation patterns under government surveillance.

According to Acock and Scott (1980, p. 67), high-visibility participation is defined as "active behaviors that can be observed or become known to others," such as wearing a campaign button, working for a political candidate and so on. Low-visibility participation refers to passive and non-public behaviors such as listening to political shows or radio. Based on previous research (e.g., Marthews & Tucker, 2017; Oz & Yanik, 2022), this study expects individuals to exercise more caution towards online political activities to avoid detection and arrest within the scope of surveillance. This caution is likely to lead to a higher degree of decline in higher visibility online political activities compared with low-visibility activities, which are perceived as relatively safer forms of participation. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

H1: Perceived online surveillance will significantly decrease high-visibility political participation more than low-visibility political activities.

The Role of Fear in Response to Surveillance

Surveillance has been extensively theorized to alter human experiences by evoking emotions such as anxiety, fear, and suspicion (Ellis et al., 2013). One of the goals of surveillance is to create political isolation by using the fear of millions of people (Starr et al., 2008). Spaces generated by surveillance can be characterized as intricate and ambiguous, incorporating features that are simultaneously ever-present and unnoticed, tangible yet intangible, and even extending beyond geographical boundaries (Ellis et al., 2013). Especially in the digital era, online political contents sometimes spread beyond the intended privacy settings (boyd, 2010). Given the enduring nature of content and its ability to remain searchable over time, individuals increasingly feel uncertain about online surveillance (boyd, 2010; Thorson, 2014).

According to the cognitive appraisal theory, individuals react to stressors or events differently, leading to the experiences of various emotions such as joy, hope, sadness, anger, and fear (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Individuals would

further take deliberate actions to cope with their emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Valentino et al., 2011). Government surveillance is linked to psychological distress, which in turn evokes various negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger (O'Connor & Jahan, 2014). Hager and Krakowski (2022) noted that some individuals experience fear while others feel anger as a response to surveillance; this divergence in emotional responses may lead to varied changes in political participation. Anger, a negative emotion, is typically triggered when individuals perceive others violating commitments or transgressing rules (Best & Krueger, 2011).

Fear, another negative emotion, can prompt changes in individuals' political behavior during uncertain and uncontrollable situations (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Nabi, 2002; S. M. Kim & Min, 2021). Anger is known to be linked with a propensity for activism (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Previous studies have suggested that anger positively affects political engagement, including involvement in election activities (Valentino et al., 2011), contacting politicians, and signing petitions (Best & Krueger, 2011), while fear is typically associated with avoidance behavior (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Weber, 2013). However, other studies have demonstrated fear's role in motivating political participation, such as encouraging information-seeking (Wagner & Morisi, 2019) or voting and signing petitions (S. M. Kim & Min, 2021; Valentino et al., 2011). Given the inconsistent findings from previous research, the role of fear in political participation remains unclear and requires further empirical investigation.

While previous research has often examined multiple negative emotions in a single study (e.g., S. M. Kim & Min, 2021; Valentino et al., 2011), the focus of this study is on the emotion of fear in response to specific government surveillance situations. Starr et al. (2008) found that, under surveillance, individuals were afraid to discuss political issues openly and honestly within their community, and often considered abandoning their political activities. The NSL has created a climate of fear in Hong Kong (Wong & Kellogg, 2021). Beginning with Jimmy Lai and the case of the 12 Hong Kongers (F. L. Lee & Chan, 2023), the arrest cases indicate the pervasive sense of fear due to government prosecution. Individuals have expressed concerns about the potential compromise of their right to a fair trial and the prospect of facing prosecution for peaceful political activism (Wong & Kellogg, 2021). Mak et al. (2024) noted that individuals experienced fear after the implementation of the NSL, triggered by the various arrest cases related to online speech. For example, within a month of the NSL's passage, Hong Kong police arrested four student activists for the comments they posted on Facebook.

This study aims to further explore the impact of fear in the period following the enforcement of NSL in Hong Kong, which has been in place for over three years. We anticipate that individuals are cautious with the law and their online behavior owing to the numerous arrest cases. Building on prior studies and focusing on the specific context of this research, we explore how fear mediates the relationship between perceived government surveillance and online political activities with varying levels of visibility. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1: How does the emotion of fear mediate the effects of perceived surveillance on online political participation at different levels of visibility?

Online Privacy Management as a Moderator

Individuals can cope with the fear generated from online government surveillance by employing various tactics. In a case study of American Muslim youth, Shresthova (2016) documented how they engaged in an ongoing and complex negotiation process under surveillance, actively

segmenting, filtering, and striving to control information about themselves across their networks and beyond. Although not every user possesses the capability to employ privacy management tools, such as using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) or installing spyware (Oz & Yanik, 2022), Bodo (2015) demonstrated that the utilization of privacy tools often surges in response to government surveillance. By utilizing online privacy management tools, individuals can identify their watchers (Oz & Yanik, 2022), thus feeling more comfortable (Mak et al., 2024; Marx, 2003) and safe (Oz & Yanik, 2022). Mak et al. (2024) confirmed that through active privacy management, users can alleviate their fear of the NSL and ultimately increase their level of online political participation. Oz and Yanik (2022) also successfully demonstrated the moderating role of online privacy skills in the relationship between government surveillance and willingness to speak out on social media. Nonetheless, individuals with higher levels of digital literacy may exhibit greater caution towards potential online surveillance and be more vigilant towards online monitoring activities by the government. Consequently, they may experience greater fear in surveilling contexts compared to those with lower levels of digital literacy, as they are more sensitive to online safety and have a better understanding of the potential dangers posed by online surveillance.

Previous research has suggested that online and social media privacy management skills are frequently employed in response to government surveillance. However, whether individuals can alleviate the feeling of being surveilled by implementing proactive privacy management, or, on the contrary, whether this awareness of surveillance increases the level of fear, is largely unknown. Against this backdrop, this study explores whether online privacy management skills can moderate the process by which perceived surveillance cause fear and subsequently affects political activities with varying degrees of visibility.

RQ2: How does the level of online privacy management skills moderate the mediating effects of fear between perceived online surveillance and political participation, at different levels of visibility?

Social and Platform Trust Factors in Online Surveillance Contexts

In the context of surveillance culture (Lyon, 2017), citizens are actively engaged in conceptualizing surveillance. This involves identifying the nature of the surveillance and the surveillant, and determining how to respond (Oz & Yanik, 2022). Under all-encompassing surveillance and a climate of mutual caution, any act of sharing can be seen as a form of exposure (Ball, 2009). Consequently, how individuals perceive the trustworthiness of the people around them and the platforms they use becomes more crucial in shaping their reactions to government surveillance. Governments employ diverse tactics to enhance the effectiveness of online surveillance. For instance, the Hong Kong administration introduced a mutual monitoring system enabling citizens to report potential breaches of the NSL through a dedicated hotline and WeChat (Mak et al., 2024). This system subtly encourages citizens to monitor and accuse one another, fostering a heightened fear of disclosing digital footprints to individuals one does not entirely trust (Mak et al., 2024). The accumulation of over 380,000 individual reports since the NSL's implementation underscores the significant impact of online reporting on shaping a culture of online surveillance (Hong Kong Police Force, 2022). Within this political framework, this study examines how social trust and trust in platforms might moderate the relationship between online government surveillance and political engagement.

Social Trust

Trust stands out as a critical factor aiding individuals in navigating risk and uncertainties (Barber, 1983; Cappella, 2002). Social trust is one of the most important characteristics used to explain human behavior and interactions (Matthes, 2013). Social trust refers to our expectations about how others will behave and react in social situations (Barber, 1983; Matthes, 2013), or the perception that other people are fair, trustworthy, and helpful in general (Cappella, 2002). It is closely linked to one's perceived power and sense of control over their own life and situations (Chun & Lee, 2017; Newton, 2004; Uslaner, 2002). Higher levels of social trust enable individuals to gain better control over themselves and navigate uncertainties.

Political communication research has proved social trust's role in fostering civic engagement, encouraging political participation (Putnam, 2000), and facilitating political expression on social media (Chun & Lee, 2017; Matthes, 2013). Matthes (2013) further demonstrated that social trust moderates the impact of network hostility on political participation by shaping people's expectations about how others in their network will react to their actions. In our research context, the expectation of others' reactions towards one's online political participation is also crucial, as it is closely related to personal safety, especially in a potentially hostile surveillance environment. Specifically, if an individual trusts that netizens encountered online will not harm them based on what they post publicly on social media, we can expect a greater sense of control and, therefore, a higher tendency for online political participation even under surveillance.

We suggest that the level of social trust may moderate the relationship between online government surveillance and individuals' political activities online, whether they are highly visible or not.

H2: Social trust will significantly moderate the relationship between perceived online surveillance and political participation at different levels of visibility. Specifically, the negative effect of perceived online surveillance on political participation will be weaker for individuals with higher levels of trust in others online, compared to those with lower levels of social trust.

Platform Trust

Unlike social trust, the role of platform trust in online political participation is rarely explored in political communication research. Only a few studies have investigated trust and ease-of-use issues associated with social media platforms (Chinje & Chinomona, 2018). Platform trust has been defined as "the degree to which a platform user's expectation, assumption, or beliefs that the platform's actions will be beneficial, favorable, or not detrimental," and it is relevant to the perception of whether it respects users' interests (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020, p. 177). Potential risks can arise from online platform settings such as user record tracking, theft of personal information, and violation of privacy (Friedman et al., 2000). Platform trust is intricately connected to privacy concerns and risk perceptions. Trust reduces users' perception of risk when interacting with other users on social media platforms (Van der Heijden et al., 2003; Y. Wang et al., 2016), whereas its absence leaves users feeling as though they have little control over risks like leaking personal information (Chai, 2011).

Political communication scholars have largely focused on investigating the role of social media in mobilizing political participation (e.g., Bachmann & de Zúñiga, 2013; Tang & Lee, 2013; Theocharis & Lowe, 2016). The concept of platform affordance has been studied as one of the key factors influencing individuals' online political engagement, as it allows users to observe and learn from each other's behaviors (D. H. Kim & Ellison, 2022). By considering a platform's features,

such as anonymity, editability, association, and persistence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Trepte, 2021), individuals can assess the trustworthiness of the platform they use.

Considering online political participation under government surveillance, individuals' perceptions of the trustworthiness of social media platforms are crucial. These perceptions significantly influence their decisions to reveal political stances, share opinions, or receive information through these platforms. More specifically, platform trust may function as a psychological buffer by cultivating perceptions of safety that mitigate the perceived risks associated with political participation under surveillance conditions. When users develop trust in social media platforms, they form expectations that these intermediary entities will operate as institutional safeguards, protecting their data integrity against potential misuse and unwarranted governmental access (World Economic Forum, 2022). In the context of online political participation, platform trust may serve as a cognitive heuristic that helps users navigate the inherent tensions between surveillance risks and political participation.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the potentially significant role of platform trust in users' online political engagement within a surveillance environment. Specifically, we suggest that platform trust may moderate the relationship between surveillance and participation at different visibility levels. We hypothesize that when individuals perceive platforms as beneficial, favorable, and not harmful (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020), they will feel less risk in expressing their political opinions or displaying their political stances on those platforms. That is, their political engagement may be less restricted even under government surveillance since they are less concerned about the potential leakage of their digital footprints on these platforms.

H3: Platform trust will significantly moderate the relationship between perceived online surveillance and political participation at different levels of visibility. Specifically, the negative effect of perceived online surveillance on political participation will be weaker for individuals with higher levels of trust in the platform they use, compared to those with lower levels of platform trust.

METHOD

Sampling Procedure & Participants

We conducted an online survey with a sample of Hong Kong residents (N = 310, age ≥ 18 years) who reported active social media use. Sample size adequacy was evaluated through two complementary approaches. First, we followed established guidelines for structural equation modeling that recommend 5-10 observations per estimated parameter (Bentler & Chou, 1987). Given our model's 62 parameters, this indicated a minimum requirement of 310 participants. Second, we conducted a Monte Carlo power analysis, a method particularly suited for complex mediation models (Schoemann et al., 2017). This analysis yielded a correlation-based power estimate of .94 for our sample size of 310, exceeding Cohen's (1992) conventional threshold of .80.

Participant recruitment was conducted through Mansfield, a Hong Kong-based survey agency, utilizing their online panel structured according to key demographic criteria. Quota sampling was employed to ensure population representativeness, with profiling questions matching gender and age distributions to the 2023 Census and Statistics Hong Kong data. Data collection occurred between April 10-15, 2024. All study participants provided informed consent, and the study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Korea University under protocol number IRB-2024-0056.

Table 1. *Sociodemographic Distributions of Study Participants*

	n	%
Gender		
Female	157	50.6
Male	153	49.4
Age		
18-29	78	25.2
30-39	82	26.4
40-49	75	24.2
50 or above	75	24.2

Note. $N = 310$.

The final sample demonstrated balanced gender distribution (49.4% male) and age stratification: 25.2% aged 18-29 years, 26.4% aged 30-39 years, and 24.2% each for ages 40-49 and 50+ years. Educational attainment skewed toward higher education, with 60.3% of participants holding at least a bachelor's degree, representing an oversampling of individuals with advanced education relative to the general population. Table 1 presents detailed sample demographics. All survey materials were presented in Cantonese to ensure linguistic accessibility for participants.

Measures

Perceived Online Government Surveillance

This was measured using two items extracted from previous research (Krueger, 2005; Oz & Yanik, 2022). Participants were asked if they believe that the government watches and tracks their social media activities and monitors their emails and web surfing, on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.01$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

High/Low-Visibility Online Political Participation

Participants were asked to report their online political participation patterns during 2023 (the previous year). Measures for high-visibility online political participation were developed by applying the definitions of high and low-visibility political participation from Acock and Scott (1980) and incorporating major online political activities identified in prior research (e.g., Krueger, 2005; Krueger, 2005; Li et al., 2024; Stoycheff, 2016; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). For high-visibility participation, four items were developed to fit the online context: writing political posts attempting to influence others, sharing/reposting political posts, displaying political stands on social media profile, and joining political activities online. Three items were used to measure low-visibility participation: watching political contents online, reading political news online, and visiting political websites. Questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Rarely/Never* to 5 = *Very Frequently/Always* (High-visibility participation: $M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.77$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$; Low-visibility participation: $M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.84$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Fear

Surveillance-induced fear was measured using two items. Participants first rated their anxiety about online government surveillance (Huddy et al., 2002) on a four-point scale (1 = *not anxious at all* to 4 = *very anxious*), indicating their apprehension about online monitoring of themselves or their families ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.92$). They then reported their fear of

government surveillance on a five-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*; *M* = 3.45, *SD* = 1.16). Given the different scale ranges (four-point and five-point), both items were standardized before computing their mean to create a composite measure (Cronbach's *α* = .77).

Online Privacy Management Skills

Participants were asked if they know "how not to expose themselves online," "how to connect to VPN to mask IP address," "how to change social media privacy settings," "how to identify intrusive spyware which was installed without permission," "how to erase some or all of the cookies on their computer," and "how to clear web browser history" (Oz & Yanik, 2022) on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (*M* = 3.17, *SD* = 1.01, Cronbach's *α* = .90).

Social Trust

Social trust was assessed using three items with an 11-point response scale ranging from 0 = *cannot be trusted at all* to 10 = *can be trusted a lot* developed by previous survey research (Howard et al., 2006). The items assessed participants' trust towards Facebook friends, Instagram followers, and individuals encountered on social media (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 1.92, Cronbach's *α* = .83).

Platform Trust

Platform trust was measured with four items on a five-point scale developed by Ayaburi and Treku (2020). Participants responded to four items about their perception towards the most widely used social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and online forum LIHKG) in Hong Kong. Specifically, they were asked the extent to which they agree if the platforms are reliable and truthful, have good motives and intentions, treat them consistently and predictably, and will not expose their personal information (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = 0.85, Cronbach's *α* = .84).

Control Variables

Two essential control variables—political interest and age—are included in this study, as they are key factors influencing online political activity patterns. While political participation has become more flexible and self-driven in the online context, the level of an individual's interest in and commitment to current political issues significantly affects their frequency and patterns of participation. Age also serves as a crucial indicator for measuring online political activities, as internet knowledge and online privacy management skills often vary across age groups. Including these control variables allows us to more accurately assess the specific impact of other key factors on online political participation.

Political Interest. Participants reported their interest in the information about what is happening in government and politics (American National Election Studies, 2012) on a five-point scale from 1 = *not interested at all* to 5 = *extremely interested* (*M* = 2.37, *SD* = 1.01).

Age. Participants reported their ages in the following ranges: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50 or above.

RESULTS

This study investigated the impact of government surveillance on individuals' political participation in the online context, using data gathered from an online survey. To examine the complex mediating and moderating relationships specified in our research model, we employed path analysis, a specialized application of structural equation modeling (SEM) using only observed variables. Path analysis was deemed particularly appropriate for this investigation as it enables the examination of both direct and indirect effects within a single analytical framework, without the measurement model complexities associated with latent variable SEM (Collier, 2020).

Perceived Surveillance and Online Political Participation (H1)

H1 proposed that perceived government surveillance would exhibit differential effects on online political participation based on visibility levels, with stronger suppression expected for high-visibility compared to low-visibility activities. To test this hypothesis, we compared two structural equation models: an unconstrained model allowing independent paths from perceived surveillance to both participation modes and a constrained model equating these paths.

Both models demonstrated robust fit according to established criteria (Collier, 2020; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The unconstrained model showed strong fit indices: χ^2 (16, N = 310) = 17.15, p = .376, CFI = .999, RMSEA = .015, RMR = .045. Similarly, the constrained model exhibited strong fit: χ^2 (17, N = 310) = 18.46, p = .361, CFI = .998, RMSEA = .017, RMR = .045. A chi-square difference test revealed no significant distinction between the models, $\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 1.31, p = .250. Following the principle of parsimony, we selected the constrained model, which revealed equivalent suppression effects of perceived surveillance on both high- and low-visibility political activities (b = -0.08, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.02], SE = 0.04, p = .038). These results failed to support H1's prediction of differential effects based on participation visibility levels.

Mediating Effects of Fear (RQ1)

Examining the mediating role of the emotion of fear (RQ1), results showed that perceived surveillance significantly increased fear (b = 0.48, 95% CI [0.39, 0.55], SE = 0.05, p < .001), which subsequently demonstrated positive associations with both high-visibility (b = 0.12, 95% CI [0.04, 0.19], SE = 0.05, p = .025) and low-visibility activities (b = 0.13, 95% CI [0.04, 0.21], SE = 0.05, p = .012). That is, individuals experiencing greater fear under perceived government surveillance showed increased engagement in both expressive and information-seeking political activities. The indirect effects through fear were significant for both high-visibility (b = 0.06, 95% CI [0.02, 0.09], SE = 0.02, p = .014) and low-visibility engagement (b = 0.06, 95% CI [0.02, 0.10], SE = 0.03, p = .016).

Collectively, these findings revealed a complex relationship between surveillance, fear, and political participation. While initial zero-order

Table 2. *Correlation Between Key Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	AVE	CR	CA
1. POS	-							.88	.96	.96
2. HIGHOPP	.00	-						.62	.89	.88
3. LOWOPP	.08	.52***	-					.63	.84	.82
4. FEAR	.53***	.16**	.21***	-				.82	.90	.77
5. OPM	.22***	.06	.04	.09	-			.60	.87	.87
6. PT	-.08	.17**	.08	-.15**	.43***	-		.58	.87	.78
7. ST	-.08	.10	.02	-.01	.20***	.49***	-	.63	.84	.95

Note. POS = perceived online government surveillance; HIGHOPP = high-visibility online political participation; LOWOPP = low-visibility online political participation; OPM = online privacy management skills; PT = platform trust; ST = social trust; AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; CA = Cronbach's alpha..

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Table 3. *Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Perceived Online Surveillance (POS) on High-and Low-Visibility Online Political Participation (OPP)*

Effect Type	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
High-Visibility OPP					
Direct	-.08	.04	.041	-.15	-.02
Indirect	.06	.02	.016	.02	.09
Total	-.02	.04	.434	-.09	.03
Low-Visibility OPP					
Direct	-.08	.04	.041	-.15	-.02
Indirect	.06	.03	.014	.02	.10
Total	-.02	.04	.591	-.08	.05

Note. *b* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval; *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval. Paths from POS to both OPP types were constrained as equal.

correlations showed no significant associations between perceived surveillance and both high-visibility (r = .00, p = .969) and low-visibility (r = .08, p = .151) political participation (Table 2), two distinct pathways emerged through path analyses. First, when controlling for fear, surveillance awareness demonstrated significant negative direct effects on both participation types, indicating fear's role as a suppressor variable. The suppression effect manifests in how the inclusion of fear strengthens the predictive value of perceived surveillance (the initial predictor) on political participation (the outcome), compared to their zero-order correlation (Conger, 1974; Holbert et al., 2012).

Second, perceived online surveillance demonstrated a strong positive relationship with fear, which in turn positively influenced both participation types. This positive indirect effect mediated by fear counterbalanced the negative direct effect of surveillance awareness on participation, thereby explaining the negligible zero-order correlations observed in our initial analysis. As demonstrated in Table 3, these opposing mechanisms—negative direct effects and positive indirect effects—effectively neutralized each other, resulting in nearly null total effects of perceived surveillance on online political engagement across visibility levels.

Moderating Role of Privacy Management Skills (RQ2)

For RQ2, we investigated whether online privacy management skills moderated the mediating effects of fear in the relationship between perceived surveillance and political participation across visibility levels. We incorporated an interaction term between perceived surveillance and privacy management skills into the model. Analysis revealed that this interaction term did not significantly affect fear (b = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.09], SE = 0.04, p = .428), suggesting that individual privacy management capabilities do not moderate the relationship between surveillance and fear, thereby leaving the fear-mediated pathway unaffected.

Moderating Role of Social Trust (H2) and Platform Trust (H3)

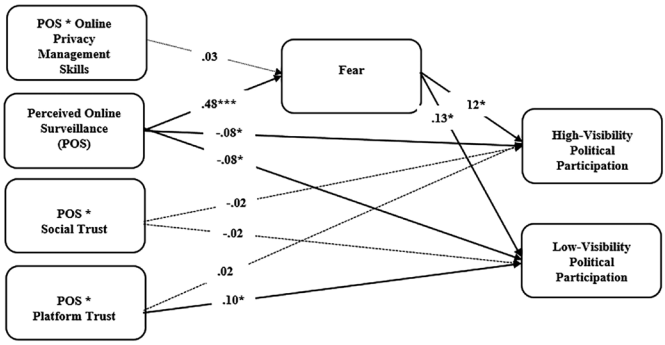
Testing the moderating effect of social trust (H2), we incorporated an interaction term between perceived surveillance and social trust into our

Table 4. *Spotlight Analysis of the Moderation Effect of Platform Trust on Low-Visibility Political Participation*

Moderator Value	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
-.85 (-1 SD)	-.13	.06	-2.33	.021	-.25	-.02
.00 (Mean)	-.04	.05	-0.87	.386	-.13	.05
.85 (+1 SD)	.05	.06	0.87	.387	-.07	.17

Note. *b* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval; *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval.

Figure 1. *Predicting Online Political Participation at Different Visibility Levels*

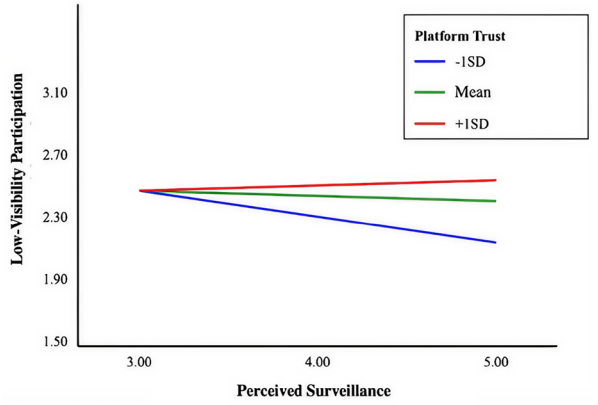


Note. Values are unstandardized coefficient. Significant paths are indicated by solid lines; nonsignificant paths are indicated by dashed lines. Online privacy management skills, social trust, platform trust, and two control variables (political interest and age) were included in the model but omitted from the figure.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

model. The analysis revealed that social trust neither exhibited significant direct effects on high-visibility (b = 0.00, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.04], SE = 0.02, p = .969) nor low-visibility (b = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.01], SE = 0.02, p = .387) political participation, nor moderated the relationship between perceived surveillance and political participation (high-visibility: b = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.01], SE = 0.02, p = .288; low-visibility: b = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.02], SE = 0.02, p = .461). Thus, H2 was not supported, indicating that the effect of perceived surveillance on online political participation remains constant across different levels of social trust.

The analysis of platform trust's moderating role (H3) revealed a more nuanced pattern. Platform trust significantly moderated the negative impact of surveillance awareness, but exclusively for low-visibility activities; the interaction term between perceived surveillance and platform trust showed a significant impact only on covert participation (b = 0.10, 95% CI [0.02, 0.19], SE = 0.05, p = .036). Subsequent spotlight analysis (detailed indices in Table 4) demonstrated that when platform trust was below average, perceived surveillance significantly suppressed low-visibility political

Figure 2. *Platform Trust as the Moderator in the Relationship between Perceived Surveillance and Low-Visibility Participation*



activities (b = -0.13, 95% CI [-0.25, -0.02], SE = 0.06, p = .021). However, this suppression effect became nonsignificant at mean and above-average levels of platform trust, suggesting that higher platform trust can buffer against surveillance's chilling effects on low-visibility political activities such as information seeking and news consumption online (Figure 2).

In contrast, while platform trust exhibited a significant boost effect on more visible political participation (b = 0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.23], SE = 0.06, p = .019), it did not meaningfully condition the effects of surveillance awareness on high-visibility political activities (b = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.10], SE = 0.05, p = .715).

Collectively, these results provide only partial support for H3, indicating that the chilling effects of surveillance awareness on more expressive political activities persist regardless of individuals' trust in social media platforms.

DISCUSSION

The impact of surveillance on political behavior remains a subject of scholarly debate, particularly regarding its potential to create either a chilling effect (e.g., Penney, 2017) or provoke backlash (Sullivan & Davenport, 2017). This issue has gained heightened relevance in the digital age, as technological advancements have enabled unprecedented expansion of online government surveillance across nations (Čas et al., 2017). Hong Kong presents a particularly compelling case study, as the region has experienced intensified online government monitoring following the implementation of the NSL in 2020.

Drawing on Lyon's (2017) conceptualization of surveillance culture and the inherently visible nature of digital environments, this study investigated visibility as a critical determinant of political participation under repressive conditions. We conceptualized political participation along two dimensions: high-visibility participation, characterized by expressive public acts, and low-visibility participation, encompassing information-seeking and more personal behaviors.

Our structural equation modeling analysis yielded unexpected results. Contrary to our initial prediction that surveillance's dampening effects would be more pronounced for highly visible

online activities compared to more covert forms of political participation, we found that surveillance-induced chilling effects pervade both high-visibility and low-visibility activities. Nevertheless, several noteworthy findings emerged from our analysis.

In our initial unconstrained model, where paths from surveillance to both modes of political participation varied freely, only the path for high-visibility participation approached statistical significance (b = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.05], SE = 0.05, p = .019), suggesting that surveillance primarily suppresses more visible expressive acts. The critical ratio between the two path coefficients, however, did not reach the conventional threshold of 1.960, leading us to adopt a constrained model with equal paths. Although this finding did not support our initial hypothesis, the unconstrained model's robust fit suggests potential differential effects of surveillance based on participation visibility—a possibility warranting further investigation.

Our analyses revealed an even more nuanced picture through the examination of mediating and moderating factors, particularly the role of fear and platform trust. The relationship between surveillance, fear, and online political participation proved especially complex. While the total effects of perceived surveillance on political participation appeared negligible, this finding masked two distinct underlying mechanisms. Specifically, when controlling for fear, perceived surveillance exhibited significant negative direct effects on both expressive and informational political activities online, suggesting individuals' rational risk-avoidance responses. Fear emerged as a suppressor in this relationship, as its inclusion in the model altered the predictive value of perceived surveillance on political participation online (Conger, 1974; Holbert et al., 2012).

More significantly, we discovered that surveillance-induced fear actually catalyzed participatory citizen action, indicating positive indirect pathways from surveillance to political engagement. These findings present an interesting contrast to existing literature. While some previous research has suggested fear's dampening effect on political participation (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Weber, 2013), our results align more closely with studies documenting fear's mobilizing potential (e.g., Valentino et al., 2011). Within the surveillance context in Hong Kong, fear emerged as a catalyst for both information-seeking behaviors and more visible forms of political expression.

This study makes a significant contribution to surveillance literature by highlighting the dual nature of government surveillance effects on political behavior. Rather than conceptualizing surveillance's impact as uniformly suppressive, our findings suggest a more nuanced model where surveillance simultaneously constrains and motivates political participation through distinct psychological mechanisms. This complexity may help explain inconsistent findings in previous surveillance research, as studies that don't account for fear as a mediating variable might overlook important indirect effects.

Our analysis revealed trust as another critical factor influencing political participation under surveillance, though its effects varied across different participation modes. Our findings demonstrate that platform trust selectively moderates the suppressive effects of perceived online surveillance, with this buffering effect being particularly pronounced in low-visibility political participation. This asymmetric moderation effect suggests that the protective function of platform trust becomes especially important for citizens employing concealment strategies under surveillance conditions. The reduced moderating effect of platform trust on high-visibility participation may indicate that users engaging in more visible political activities have already factored in and accepted higher baseline surveillance risks.

In contrast, we found limited support for the moderating role of social trust, which may reflect

the adaptive strategies already employed by Hong Kong citizens. Research has shown that politically active youth in Hong Kong have been restricting their social media visibility since the Umbrella Movement (Chu & Yeo, 2020), and college students frequently adjust their privacy settings to control self-disclosure (Liu et al., 2017). These established privacy management practices suggest that citizens may have already curated their trusted online social circles, potentially reducing the significance of broader social trust in their political participation decisions.

This study has several important limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our operationalization of low-visibility political participation focused primarily on information-seeking behaviors, potentially overlooking other important forms of hidden contention. Future studies would be strengthened by incorporating a more comprehensive range of concealment strategies, including the use of pseudonyms and multi-layered political messaging (e.g., Honari, 2018; A. Lee, 2018), to better capture how individuals navigate political expression under surveillance conditions. Second, our measurement of fear conflated elements of both fear and anxiety, suggesting the need for more refined emotional measures in future studies. Moreover, expanding the investigation to include other salient emotions, particularly anger, would provide a more nuanced understanding of emotional responses to surveillance.

Methodological constraints also merit consideration. The study's cross-sectional design inherently limits our ability to establish causal relationships among the key variables. Additionally, our relatively small sample size, while sufficient to maintain adequate statistical power, prevented the inclusion of several theoretically important variables commonly examined in political participation research, such as political efficacy and political trust (e.g., Pyun & Kim, 2023). The sample's composition presented another challenge: more than half of our respondents indicated either a neutral political orientation or selected "Don't know," making it difficult to analyze how political stances might influence responses to surveillance. Although we controlled for crucial variables such as political interest and age, future research would benefit from larger samples that allow for the inclusion of a more comprehensive set of control variables.

Despite these limitations, this study makes significant contributions to surveillance and political communication research, particularly within Hong Kong's current political context. As Hong Kong continues to experience political upheaval and increasing threats to freedom of speech, our findings about fear's potential to mitigate government surveillance's adverse effects on online political participation provide important insights. Furthermore, our emphasis on the role of platform trust becomes increasingly relevant as digital networking platforms continue to evolve, especially in promoting political information seeking. The conditional process model we propose helps illuminate the complex pathways through which online governmental surveillance affects political participation, mediated and moderated by multiple factors. This understanding is crucial for comprehending how individuals leverage digital platform affordances to manage and respond to repressive government surveillance. Future research should explore the specific platform affordances that contribute to user trust, particularly focusing on commonly discussed features such as anonymity, editability, association, and persistence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Trepte, 2021). Additionally, investigating the relationship between different political orientations and surveillance responses would provide valuable insights, particularly given Hong Kong's complex political landscape. Such research would further enhance our understanding of how individuals navigate political participation under increasing surveillance pressure.

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