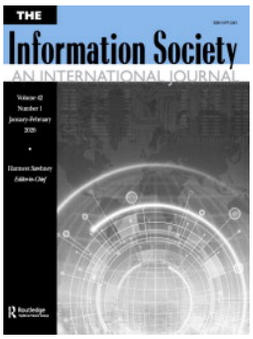

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From risk to relational distance: Dis/connective identification in the Hong Kong digital diaspora

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we introduce *dis/connective identification* to theorize how diasporic actors negotiate belonging, safety, and visibility through strategic forms of digital engagement and disengagement under conditions of transnational repression. Challenging dominant emphases on persistent connectivity in digital migration and diaspora studies, we conceptualize dis/connective identification as a process of modulating symbolic, social, and affective *relational distances* across hybrid media environments. Drawing on 13 in-depth interviews with organizers of the post-2019 Hong Kong digital diaspora, we identify three specific practices, namely moralizing platform use, calibrating political security and trust, and expressing affective belonging, with which diasporic actors navigate multifaceted uncertainties across contexts within a bounded, risk-aware community. Rather than treating disconnection as failure or absence, we argue that it should be understood as a mode of connective agency that varies in intensity, temporality, and visibility. Our study contributes to digital diaspora studies, disconnection studies, and connective action research by highlighting the relational and contingent nature of diasporic identification under specific sociotechnical conditions.

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Digital diaspora; disconnection studies; dis/connective identification; Hong Kong; relational sociology

Introduction

In the years since Hong Kong's 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests, a wave of politically motivated emigration has reshaped the city's global footprint. Tens of thousands of Hongkongers, including frontline protesters, politicians, journalists, artists, and ordinary residents, have resettled in cities such as London, Toronto, and Taipei. Across these dispersed geographies, a post-protest digital diaspora has taken form, tethered not only by protest memory, cultural values, political ideals, and collective trauma, but also by digital technologies and media infrastructures. From Telegram channels that disseminate diasporic news and WhatsApp groups that organize local mutual aid, to YouTube and Instagram accounts that host vernacular histories, political commentary, and Cantonese-language cultural expression, these digital platforms have become lifelines for preserving subaltern "Hongkonger" language, encrypted intimacy, and political solidarity across borders.

Nevertheless, these platform-dependent diasporic communities operate under risky conditions. Since the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in mid-2020, state repression has extended far beyond the city's borders, asserting extraterritorial jurisdiction over political dissent. Diasporic groups are surveilled both offline and online, and public social media posts may endanger family members who remain in Hong Kong (Lam and Chow 2025). As Hong Kong authorities issue overseas arrest warrants for exiled activists, digital connectivity simultaneously facilitates diasporic organizing and introduces substantial risks. What was once a mode of collective identity performance and transnational solidarity now entails navigating threats of surveillance, reputational harm, and sociopolitical infiltration. In short, beyond the immediate technical concerns of privacy and data security, these risks are also *political*, including targeted state surveillance and legal repercussions, as well as *social* and *affective*, ranging from exclusion and fatigue to internal fragmentation and mistrust.

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While existing scholarship on digital migration and diaspora has theorized diasporic identification as hybrid, processual, and contested (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022; Georgiou 2006; Leurs 2015), it often remains anchored in an optimistic paradigm of constant connectivity. The dominant narrative celebrates the "connected migrant" (Diminescu 2008; Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018), whose persistent digital presence enables visibility and cohesion across social, spatial, and temporal borders (Brinkerhoff 2009; Ponzanesi 2020). However, this approach tends to obscure the precarious conditions under which many diasporic communities operate, conditions where visibility can be dangerous, and disconnection becomes not failure but a survival strategy.

In this article, we argue that digital connectivity must be critically examined in understanding the identification dynamics of digital diasporas. Connectivity is *not* always safe or desirable, and diasporic identification often unfolds through cautious (dis)engagement with digital technologies. Building on two strands of communication and media studies, namely connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) and disconnection studies (Cascone and Bonini 2025; Hesselberth 2018; Kaun 2021), we introduce the concept of *dis/connective identification* to theorize the relational construction and maintenance of digital diasporic community.

Following a relational approach in sociological research on group formation (Emirbayer 1997; Lichterman 2008), we conceptualize dis/connective identification as a process of making, unmaking, and maintaining symbolic, social, and affective forms of *relational distance* within an imagined diasporic community under sociotechnical conditions. By relational distance, we mean the degrees of proximity and connectedness among actors who remain part of the same community, shaped through strategic connection and withdrawal across *hybrid media environments*, an interwoven configuration in which multiple platforms, data flows, and technical infrastructures interact within broader power dynamics, enabling new identifications, organizational forms, and everyday uses that bridge online and offline activity (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020; Chadwick 2013; Toivanen, Nelimarkka, and Valaskivi 2022). This perspective foregrounds social trust, communal care, and political security not as fixed attributes but as situated relational practices enacted through decisions about what is and is not communicated, where, and to whom.

Drawing on 13 in-depth interviews with diasporic organizers based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan, in this article, we address two guiding research questions:

> **RQ1:** In the face of transnational repression, how do Hong Kong diasporic actors sustain and negotiate identity-based relations with one another?

> **RQ2:** How does dis/connective identification shape the formation and maintenance of a bounded, risk-sensitive digital diasporic community?

Our findings show how diasporic actors moralize linguistic cues, protest esthetics, and specific platform (non-)use to position individuals on a shared political spectrum. They also navigate competing roles and affiliations through ongoing calibration of social trust and political security across socio-digital contexts. In addition, they express and negotiate affective belonging through encrypted channels, curated publicness, and everyday forms of emotional attunement. Taken together, these practices reveal how diasporic actors strategically manage relational distance to sustain a bounded, risk-sensitive diasporic community through digital technologies under conditions of transnational repression.

Our article makes three key contributions. First, it proposes dis/connective identification as a theoretical intervention that centers disconnection, risk, and infrastructural conditions in digital diasporic community. Second, it bridges the literatures of relational sociology, disconnection studies, digital diaspora, and connective action by reframing dis/connection as a generative, relational process of identity making rather than a deficit, thereby fostering connective agency for political and cultural organizing. Third, it provides a grounded, empirical account of how digital infrastructures and everyday relational distances shape diasporic identification under the long shadow of transnational repression.

We start by reviewing key literature on digital diasporas and explains how the dis/connective identification framework builds on and extends existing debates. We then situate the post Anti-ELAB migration wave from Hong Kong and describe our methodology. Thereafter, we present our findings, organized around three relational practices in dis/connective identification: moralizing platform use, calibrating political security and trust, and expressing affective belonging. We conclude with a discussion of its conceptual contributions and directions for future research.

Literature review

Digital diaspora, identification, and risk: Beyond always-on connectivity

Digital diaspora research has extensively examined how digital technologies reconfigure diasporic identity,

which is often theorized as a process of (re)making boundaries and belongings through symbolic practices and cultural articulations in transnational settings (Brinkerhoff 2009; Georgiou 2006; Nedelcu 2019). In diaspora studies, while earlier accounts often assumed diasporic identity to be a stable collective consciousness linked to homeland mythologies (Tölölyan 1996), contemporary approaches, especially those informed by postcolonial and feminist thought, emphasize diasporic identity as a hybrid and dynamic negotiation: often contradictory and internally heterogeneous, shaped by intersectional differences of gender, class, generation, and migration history (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022; Guo 2022).

As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, the concept of "identity" has become analytically overextended in the social sciences and humanities. They advocate using "identification" instead to capture the situated and complex processes through which individuals identify themselves, both cognitively and emotionally, with another person, category, or collectivity. In the context of diaspora, Ben-Rafael (2013) similarly emphasizes that identification concerns the degree of importance individuals attach to a collective identity while remaining responsive to external circumstances such as unequal participation in resources or shifting political conditions. In this article, we use diasporic identification to highlight the active, situated, and contested nature of diasporic community formation.

Within digital diaspora studies, this processual approach to diasporic identification has been closely tied to the idea of connectivity, exemplified by concepts like "connected migrants" (Diminescu 2008) and "connected refugee" (Smets 2018), which capture migrants' increasingly digitally mediated experiences beyond binaries such as "home"/"host" countries and encapsulation *versus* cosmopolitanization (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018; Moran 2023).

However, this dominant connectivity approach to diasporic identification remains limited in three ways. First, existing work tends to focus on the representational practices of diasporic users to construct belonging, cultivate encrypted intimacy, and engage in identity politics on social media (Aghapouri 2020; Alinejad 2019; Aziz 2024; Ponzanesi 2020), while paying less attention to the infrastructural aspects and socio-technical affordances of digital technologies that enable and moderate these practices. This overlooks how digital infrastructures and platform features shape, limit, or enable these practices in the first place. Second, with a few recent exceptions (Pyo and Gu 2023), the majority of work focuses on individual platforms, overlooking the hybrid media environments through which diasporic users shift across apps, platforms, and devices to perform and manage visibility. Third, and more importantly, the dominant approach carries an optimistic connectivity bias, assuming that more connection leads to stronger belongings, while disconnection is seen as absence, disengagement, or the breakdown of diasporic identity. This overlooks the possibility that disconnection itself could be a meaningful, agentic, and deliberate act within diasporic life.

These theoretical assumptions become increasingly untenable for diasporic communities facing transnational repression, particularly when considering the relationship between digital connection and risk. By *risk*, we refer to a subjective assessment of potential harm, characterized by uncertainty and shaped by individuals' and collectives' interpretations and evaluations, rooted in their contexts, lived experiences, and knowledge from past events (Lupton 1999). Existing literature on transnational repression and diasporic activism has already documented how authoritarian regimes adopt both institutional means, such as legal coercion and media manipulation, and informal tactics like "proxy punishment" (i.e., targeting activists' families in their home countries) to suppress dissident voices overseas (Moss 2018; Moss, Michaelsen, and Kennedy 2022; Wong 2024). In such contexts, digital visibility can be dangerous—exposing individuals to surveillance, political targeting, or unwanted familial scrutiny—whereas identity-making involves not only expressive presence, but also situational absence used to manage exposure, and avoid risks. Connectivity, therefore, must be contingent, calculated, and partial, as a strategy for mitigating risk for diasporic communities.

In this light, the relationship between diasporic identification and connectivity must be critically reconsidered in a complex digital environment. Particularly under conditions of state repression, the act of disconnecting from digital technologies can be as constitutive of identity as the act of performing solidarity. Grounded in this theoretical position, we draw from relational sociology, connective action, and disconnection studies to propose a *dis/connective identification* framework.

Toward a dis/connective identification framework

Relational sociology emphasizes the processual nature of social reality, in contrast to static, substantive categories often assumed in sociological inquiries (Emirbayer 1997). This approach reconceptualizes the social world as a set of dynamic transactions through

which individuals and collectives derive and transform their meanings and identities, thereby reformulating sociological concepts such as power, agency, and inequality and linking macro and micro scales of inquiry. In the context of digital diaspora, a relational perspective highlights identification as emerging through interactions that span these scales, from platform affordances to transnational politics, while unsettling the imperative of always-on connectivity in most digital diaspora research.

In communication and media studies, the idea of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) describes the personalized, networked forms of collective action enabled by digital media. In contrast to reliance on formal organizations, shared ideologies, or unified narratives, connective action spotlights loosely coordinated, technology-driven mobilizations. These networks enable large-scale participation without requiring strong collective identity, allowing for adaptability to shifting political contexts (Bang and Halupka 2019; Malik 2022; Wang and Zhou 2021).

In diasporic settings, this perspective reconceptualizes identification not solely as the product of collectivity but also as networked processes enacted through decentralized and adaptive digital ties. In post-protest contexts such as Hong Kong, this connective logic helps explain the continuity, decline, and transformation of diasporic communities in a hybrid media environment after cycles of contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

Disconnection studies challenge the assumption that constant connectivity is either desirable or inevitable. Contrary to framing disconnection as a deficit, this literature conceptualizes strategic dis/connection as a form of self-care and resistance (Hesselberth 2018; Kaun 2021). Kaun and Treré (2020) frame disconnection as a form of political activism that enables individuals and collectives to resist the temporal logics of platform capitalism. Similarly, Moe and Madsen (2021) identify five conceptual positions, namely health, concentration, existentiality, freedom, and sustainability, to mark disconnection from internal practice to outward, socially embedded action. Aligned with this line, recent work on digital migration argues that disconnection is deeply situational and affective (Minchilli 2024). For instance, Cascone and Bonini (2025) show that migrants' phone use is not modulated by access to technical connectivity but in response to shifting emotional needs, privacy concerns, and risk perceptions. Considered together, these studies underscore that disconnection is not a retreat from digital life, but a strategic and situated practice configured by affective, social, and temporal conditions.

To conceptualize how these relational dynamics take shape within digital diaspora, we consider the notion of "mapping," which focuses on how groups define both themselves and their social surroundings in concrete settings (Lichterman 2008). As Lichterman (2008) points out, in mapping boundary drawing is not an afterthought but *a constitutive act* through which collectivities continually negotiate their identities and relationships. We argue that this mapping perspective also assumes a spatial conception of relationship maintenance that positions belonging along coordinates of distance and proximity. This spatial metaphor brings to the fore how social actors locate themselves and others within a broader political field where closeness, differentiation, and orientation continually shift.

Building on these insights, we propose the concept of dis/connective identification to capture the relational dynamics of diasporic community formation. We define *dis/connective identification* as a process of making, unmaking, and maintaining symbolic, social, and affective forms of *relational distance* within an imagined diasporic community under sociotechnical conditions. It directs attention to how actors manage relational distance through strategic connection and withdrawal across hybrid media environments where multiple platforms, data flows, and infrastructures intersect. This process is shaped by power relations, including structural inequalities, transnational repression, and contested legitimacy of diasporic actors. Whereas collective identity presumes cohesion around a shared narrative or stable group formation, dis/connective identification is provisional, situational, and risk-sensitive, explaining how diasporic actors negotiate belonging by calibrating presence, withdrawal, and proximity under uncertainty.

Analytically, dis/connective identification comprises three constitutive forms of relational practices. First, *moralizing platform use* refers to the cultural signs, discourses, and platform choices through which diasporic actors ascribe moral meaning to digital practices and use them to interpret alignment and authenticate political belonging in specific socio-historical contexts. These cues do not circulate freely but are selectively shared in situations where they remain legible and safe. Second, calibrating political security and trust captures how diasporic actors navigate different social roles across contexts such as work, family, and community life by assessing who can be trusted and what forms of digital visibility are politically safe. This often involves managing technologies so that one's platform use aligns with perceived risk, social norms, and personal values (Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019). Third, expressing affective

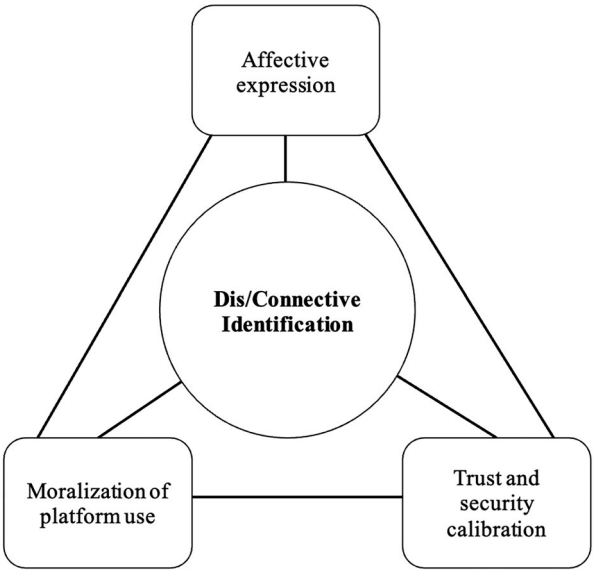

Figure 1. Dis/connective identification framework.

belonging foregrounds the relational practices through which emotional needs, vulnerabilities, and intimacies are managed in diasporic life under particular socio-technical circumstances. Understood through these dimensions, dis/connective identification comprise a diverse set of relational practices that vary in intensity, temporality, and visibility (Figure 1). Across these dimensions, risks and dis/connection are not simply external factors but generative forces structuring community formation and continuity. Importantly, the notion of dis/connective identification does not reject collective identity, but rather complements it by foregrounding the relational work required to sustain belonging when continuous presence is not always safe.

Research context and methodology

Hong Kong digital diaspora after the Anti-ELAB protests

Hong Kong has long been characterized as a city of migration, shaped by successive waves of displacement and mobility throughout its colonial and postcolonial history (Fong 2022). The most recent and politically charged wave arose in the aftermath of the 2019–2020 Anti-ELAB protests, a city-wide mass mobilization that drew participation from nearly half the population and catalyzed the formation of a transnational "international front" for advocacy and solidarity (Cheng, Lee, Yuen, and Tang 2022). Everyday life during the protests became intensely politicized, with digital tools enabling new repertoires of resistance. Activists used online platforms for community organizing, boycotting pro-regime businesses, and real-time coordination (Chung 2020).

In response, the Beijing and Hong Kong governments enacted sweeping legal and institutional reforms, most notably the National Security Law (NSL) in mid-2020. The NSL criminalized dissent both domestically and abroad, expanded surveillance reach into diasporic spaces, and catalyzed widespread political disillusionment and emigration (Chan 2018; Ho 2024). Survey data from the Chinese University of Hong Kong revealed that a significant portion of the population, especially younger and politically engaged citizens, expressed intentions to leave the city, citing politics fatigue, instability, and declining civic freedoms (HKIAPS 2024). By 2021, nearly 90,000 residents had emigrated in a single year, the steepest population decline in decades (AFP 2021). Major host countries included Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Taiwan, each offering tailored immigration pathways, such as the UK's BN(O) visa scheme and Canada's Hong Kong Permanent Residence Pathways. This new wave of migration differs from earlier patterns: it is driven by political urgency rather than economic aspiration and is deeply entangled with digital infrastructures that facilitate connection, coordination, and cultural reproduction across borders.

Even as on-the-ground mobilization declined due to pandemic restrictions and intensifying repression, the political energy of the movement persisted online and across borders (Ho 2024). Digital platforms became essential for maintaining transnational ties and cultivating diasporic communities. From mutual aid coordination on WhatsApp to protest archiving on Instagram and encrypted organizing on Telegram, these infrastructures now serve as the connective tissue of dispersed, post-protest publics (Tong 2025). Yet these same infrastructures have also become sites of vulnerability, given the potential for transnational repression and digital surveillance. Within this emergent digital diaspora, the politics of identity, trust, and risk are tightly interwoven with technological infrastructures and relational practices of dis/connection.

Method and data

Against this backdrop, in this study, we draw on 13 semi-structured interviews conducted between June and September 2024 with organizers of the Hong Kong diaspora based in North America, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan. Interviewees were recruited through a combination of direct outreach to diasporic

organizations, social media engagement, as well as snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese by two bilingual researchers, ensuring cultural and linguistic alignment throughout the data collection process.

Given the political sensitivity of Hong Kong diasporic organizing and the risks associated with speaking publicly about transnational repression, the sample size remained intentionally small but analytically sufficient. Rather than aiming for numerical representativeness, data collection continued until theoretical sufficiency was reached, when additional interviews no longer produced new insights into the core analytical dimensions. Despite the diversity of organizers' host societies, the digital diaspora context illustrates a transnational community in which cross-national differences are less relevant, as potential threats of repression stem primarily from the homeland state.

In this study, we focused on diasporic organizers, who are individuals actively engaged in community work, advocacy, or professional initiatives related to the Hong Kong diaspora (Appendix A). These participants were selected for their varied roles in organizing around or through digital technologies, including community-building, information sharing, and risk navigation. As key nodes across transnational and local diasporic networks, organizers are uniquely positioned to mediate between audiences, navigate platform infrastructures, and negotiate multiple roles. Their everyday media practices demonstrate how identification is shaped not only through public expression and diasporic narratives but also through situated practices of connection and disconnection. Furthermore, our data analysis distinguishes between two interrelated levels of relational practice: organizational work (e.g., vetting, moderation, group management) and everyday work (e.g., friending, messaging, commenting). This distinction guided our coding and interpretation of the data, helping us trace how risk mitigation and identity performance unfold across collective and personal domains.

The sample included organizers aged 20–70, spanning occupations such as legal professionals, educators, media workers, and community organizers. While all interviewees had tertiary education, reflecting the profile of those active in transnational civic engagement, their migration trajectories varied. Some relocated after the 2019 protests, while others had lived abroad since earlier migration waves in the 1980s and 1990s. This generational diversity enabled exploration of how life-course experiences shaped perceptions of identity, risk, and digital engagement.

To ensure interviewee safety, all interviews were conducted *via* Jitsi Meet, an encrypted, open-source video platform. No identifying information, including legal or immigration status, was collected. With interviewees' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and collaboratively translated from Cantonese to English to preserve contextual and affective nuance. Our study received ethics approval from the institutional review board at the first author's university. Interviewees were informed of the research purposes, data protection measures, and their right to withdraw at any time, with verbal consent recorded before each interview.

For data analysis and theorizing, we followed the ethos of an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), in which reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) served to generate a synthetic dialogue between the literature on digital diaspora, connective action, and disconnection studies. Abduction refers to "a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (167). Procedurally, an initial codebook was developed from early transcripts and interview notes, focusing on four domains: (1) digital media practices (e.g., use of encrypted messaging apps or alternative news platforms), (2) risk perceptions (e.g., concerns about surveillance or legal repercussions), (3) emotional expressions of diasporic belonging (e.g., feelings of nostalgia or loss), and (4) understandings of Hong Kong culture and identity (e.g., reinterpretations of cultural symbols or moral values). As the abductive analysis progressed, we revisited the same observation trans-situationally and defamiliarize taken-for-granted assumptions in relation to diasporic identity formation (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Through this process, we constructed the dis/connective identification framework as a conceptual synthesis.

Crafting relational distances: Diasporic Hong Konger as a dis/connective identification

Moralizing platform use: Degree of political alignment

In a digitally mediated environment where connection is both lifeline and liability, diasporic Hongkongers interpret and respond to risk through digital platforms and social media not only by choosing what to say and to whom, but by strategically managing connection and disconnection as part of their identification work. Our interview data show that diasporic

organizers rely on moralizing platform choices and uses to interpret degrees of political alignment and, in turn, adjust relational distance when deciding whom to trust symbolically. Cantonese idioms, protest-era memes, yellow-ribbon profile banners, or, just as telling, a refusal to install WeChat become shorthand for one's political position. On platforms where anonymity is common and surveillance is presumed, these cues serve as soft forms of recognition, such that a glance at wording, an emoji, or the absence of either is often enough to gauge whether someone is an "authentic" Hongkonger.

Diaspora organizers described informal entry rituals that blend cultural recognition with digital forensics. Alex, a veteran organizer based in the US, screens newcomers by asking them to list hallmark protest slogans and incidents, then audits their Facebook timelines: "I ask questions to see if they're truly 'yellow ribbon'—can they list the three protest slogans, name the key incidents? Then I look at their Facebook history. If the account started after 2019 it's usually fake. And if someone wiped all their posts, that's unacceptable." Such practices prize the temporal consistency of sustained activism as evidence of political commitment. Thomas, another community organizer in Canada, made the point personal: "The Umbrella Movement resonates because I've followed events since Tung Chee-hwa's time; it's where my roots are." Linguistic nuance functions much the same way. Mastery of protest slang or the use of traditional characters signals insider status, whereas simplified script or a Mandarin default raises doubts. Even references to street-stall fish balls or Cantopop lyrics form a living archive of Hongkonger cultural core, instantly bonding those who recognize them.

Yet moralizing platform use is rarely tidy. Attempts to codify a "genuine Hongkonger" risk collapsing the very hybridity that has long defined the city. Existing literature has emphasized the hybridity of post-colonial Hong Kong identity, highlighting how the identification process of Hongkonger and the idea of "Hong Kong-ness" are shaped by British colonialism, Chinese nationalism, diverse ethnic and cultural origins from mainland China due to trans-border migrations, alongside local subaltern cultures (Fung and Chan 2017; Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2007). Keith, a political organizer who migrated to Canada in his early 30s after the 2019 protests, feels the friction daily: "People are complex. When it comes to political values, a lot of older folks, who didn't go through the movement, watch from a distance and can't understand why young people are against the government. There's a disconnect in political ideals, so you start to question: are they being disingenuous, or do they just not get it? Even among younger people, if they grew up here in Canada, like CBCs [Canadian-born Chinese], they might mostly speak Mandarin or English, and their social circles might be mostly mainland Chinese. So again, you feel this *disconnect*, like they don't really fit in." Here, Keith's use of "disconnect" is not purely rhetorical, but points to symbolic fractures in political experience, linguistic fluency, and cultural affinity. These disconnects illustrate how diasporic belonging is structured by layered dis/connections across symbolic markers. Moreover, such symbolic distinctions influence patterns of affiliation and distance, hinting at the everyday work of tending to relational boundaries across generational lines.

In the meantime, algorithmic feeds scramble symbolic cues. Monica recounted scrolling local Hong Kong meme videos on YouTube or Instagram and noticed that the comment threads were no longer dominated by traditional Chinese characters or Cantonese pinyin. "It used to be all traditional characters; now there are simplified characters, I think those are from mainlanders and it indicates a change." Platform recommendation systems recirculate cultural clues and protest iconography far beyond its original publics, blurring the old border between "us" and "them."

Symbolic legibility also shifts across platforms. A profile that looks unmistakably "yellow" on Instagram may appear neutral on LinkedIn, whereas a handle heavy with Telegram protest stickers disappears in a sterile Signal chat. Diasporic organizers therefore moderate their everyday expression, holding back until symbolic cues accumulate convincingly, an everyday choreography of connection and caution. When symbolic cues misfire, uncertainty sets in. Silence around a meme, the wrong character set, or mention of a contested leader triggers hesitation and, at times, self-censorship. Diasporic Hongkongers withdraw from chats or lurk until further evidence clarifies alignment. While this hedging protects against infiltration, it can also stifle dialogue and exclude newcomers still learning the cultural code.

More significantly, platform nonuse itself carries symbolic weight. Rocky, a political organizer now based in the UK, put it bluntly: "If a Hongkonger here is still using WeChat, it shows their 'yellow-ness' is limited. Platform choices reflect where someone sits politically." To most organizers we met, rejecting WeChat or RedNote (Xiaohongshu) and embracing Signal or Telegram has been a symbolic act to project vigilance and solidarity. Subsequently, technological and platform choices are turned into identity-markers

that signal alignment and resistance. However, this signaling has limits, given that workplaces often require so-called mainland-affiliated platforms, while transnational families may insist on WeChat for elderly relatives. The same apps that index commitment can therefore jeopardize livelihoods or kin ties. Rocky acknowledges the bind: "Among Hongkongers, Signal feels like a projection of identity, people who 'get it' know why you're there, but I still need other apps for my job." Identification performance becomes a matter of context-switching, foreshadowing the calibration of political trust traced in the next section.

Moralizing platform use, therefore, allows diasporic actors to inhabit a shared media environment without explicit confrontation, filtering connection through tone, slang, and infrastructural choice. These cues offer a communal shorthand that sustains internal solidarity under the specter of surveillance. However, they impose exacting standards of legibility, marginalizing those less fluent in diasporic vernaculars or forced into pragmatic platform compromises. In making belonging feelable, symbolic distinction doubles as an apparatus of soft exclusion, affirming in-group solidarity while continually revealing the risks of being too visible, too silent, or simply misread in the connective spaces of a digital diaspora.

Calibrating political security and social trust

While symbolic markers help diasporic Hongkongers intuit political alignment, sustaining social trust and navigating inclusion depend on calibrating relational distance, the everyday work through which socio-digital connections are formed, maintained, or withheld across shifting roles and situated contexts. Many diasporic organizers described the need to manage multiple, sometimes competing, social identities: being a politically active Hongkonger, a professional abroad, a family member, and a participant in a fragmented diaspora. This ongoing negotiation unfolded across platforms, daily conversations, and unavoidable encounters, each carrying distinct social, political, and emotional stakes. Through these incremental interactions and selective disclosures, actors continually evaluate risk, loyalty, and trustworthiness, shaping how relational distance is calibrated in everyday diasporic life.

Social trust was rarely immediate. It was accrued through sustained co-presence—whether in encrypted group chats, bounded community networks, or private spaces. Temporal duration thus mattered because long-term engagement or consistent visibility within the community often carried more weight than symbolic alignment alone. Even when someone passed symbolic vetting, inclusion was not automatic. As Rocky noted, "People who interact with me, or choose to, are probably already politically filtered." Political alignment may open the door, but relational trust is built gradually, through repeated interactions, shared networks, or histories of collaboration. By contrast, intermittent participation or sudden reappearance after long absences could raise suspicion, illustrating how temporality intersects with relational distances. Drawing on the language of social network theory, diasporic Hong Kong organizers relied on distant but traceable weak ties to make initial judgments, while strong ties and shared activist experiences remained central to sustaining deep collaboration.

Yet even among those who passed both symbolic vetting, factionalism, and interpersonal mistrust often limited deeper cooperation. Participants described friction between political subgroups within the Hong Kong diaspora, ranging from radicals and localists to moderates and self-identified pan-democrats, as well as generational divides. Politics fatigue also contributed to friction. Many also described adjusting their visibility and engagement across different social contexts, managing identification through compartmentalization. This was especially evident in professional and family domains, where political expression could carry legal, economic, or emotional risks. David explained: "I really didn't want to use [mainland Chinese apps] for work at first. But now, sometimes I have no choice because of job requirements." He recounted downloading RedNote only because work-related materials and evidence were hosted there: "There are definite security concerns with these technologies, but I couldn't avoid it." Others, like Jesper, described more deliberate technical management of communication practices: maintaining separate logins for Telegram, Signal, LinkedIn, and Discord to compartmentalize communication based on audience, purpose, and sensitivity. For some, nonuse of mainland Chinese platforms, especially WeChat, was a political line; for others, it was an unavoidable compromise.

This flexibility also extended to family relationships, where differing political views or dependencies required careful navigation. As Rocky reflected: "Just because someone uses WeChat doesn't mean they're not 'yellow.' Maybe they're politically aligned with us, but their father still works in mainland China, and they need to stay in touch. I try to get a fuller picture by getting to know someone and gradually piecing together all these weak signals to make a more rounded or provisional judgment." Managing relational distances was often less about enforcing purity and

more about interpreting contradiction. Both social trust and political security are contingent and always provisional, conditioned as much by personal histories and social obligations as by political performance online.

While many diasporic organizers spoke about strategic management of identification across digital spaces, they also emphasized the emotional strain of this work. Deciding what to say, how much to disclose, whether to engage, all of this constant calibration was described as exhausting, frustrating, and sometimes isolating. Some interviewees expressed guilt for distancing themselves from more "apolitical" or less informed peers, even when doing so felt necessary.

Diasporic Hongkongers worked to sustain connection while managing trust, juggling competing social roles, and keeping aspects of themselves hidden or compartmentalized. Calibrating social proximity enabled them to sustain feelings of closeness without full exposure, to belong without always revealing. However, this ongoing calibration also carried affective burdens of building community under pressure, a theme we turn to next.

Expressing affective group belonging

Affective belonging is practiced through emotional attunement and everyday expressions that reinforce or loosen relational closeness among diasporic Hongkongers. Beyond symbolic cues and social ties, participants engaged in the deliberate tuning of emotional expression and engagement through conscious digital dis/connection in response to perceived risk, platform dynamics, and social context. Shared feelings of grief, fatigue, fear, and companionship shaped how they navigated diasporic belonging, not only through what they expressed but also through what they withheld. More often, instead of being openly performed, emotion was selectively shared, withdrawn, or encrypted. From news avoidance and curated silence to intimate group chats, these affective strategies enabled participants to remain connected while protecting their emotional energy in environments marked by visibility and vulnerability.

Many organizers reiterated the emotional strain of staying connected. For some, the constant flow of updates, images, and anniversary posts became overwhelming. Paul, a longtime organizer now based in Canada, reflected: "No one really commemorates the Umbrella Movement anymore. There are just too many dates … When people started sharing protest footage from five years ago, that's when I really felt protest fatigue." What had once served as a unifying emotional archive began to feel burdensome. As collective rituals fragmented, Paul noted that some diasporic organizers shifted their focus toward more sustainable, care-based forms of community work. "Some younger groups are asking: should we still be organizing? Or focus on helping others resettle and rebuild their lives? Maybe that's how new community centers will grow."

Others recounted the need to emotionally distance themselves as a form of self-preservation. David, reflecting on casual conversations with Chinese housemates, said: "I'm not worried they're spies. It's more complicated than that … Honestly, it's exhausting. It's like your friend telling you about their breakup story while you are not sure how to react … Not because you fear judgment, but because you don't want to further hurt them and the emotional cost is just too high." Rather than overt fear, what emerged from his articulation was a mix of trauma, powerlessness, and the exhaustion of repetition that led to selective silence in the digital sphere. More fundamentally, the act of selective silence was neither merely about distrust nor resistance, but about not knowing how to express suffering without making the situation harder, for oneself or others. This type of curated withdrawal was a recurring pattern: participants pulled back not from disengagement, but because the affective labor of recounting or explaining one's stance became unsustainable.

For many organizers we met, platform choice was not just about technical privacy or symbolic alignment, but also about emotional protection. In other words, diasporic Hongkongers curated their own digital to maintain *felt security* and *affective bondings*. Smaller, encrypted groups on Signal or Telegram offered a buffer from emotionally intense or surveillance-heavy spaces like Facebook. Alex described how his affective investment often occurred in solitude: "I watch news and often reshare things on Facebook," he said, "In my workplace and social circles in the US, there aren't any other Hongkongers … but when I watch the news I just felt it was impossible for me to remain silent. I have got to do something about it." Even when his initial outreach messages to activist networks went unanswered, he remained emotionally invested. "I figured it was for safety reasons—of course they wouldn't respond. That's just how it is."

Encrypted intimacy was one connective strategy participants used to maintain emotional proximity without full exposure. These intimate channels functioned not only as safe spaces for cultural continuity and political organizing, but also as affective lifelines.

Diasporic Hongkoners shared memes, humor, and check-ins that sustained a sense of solidarity even in the absence of direct action. This quiet affective labor, invisible on public platforms, was crucial for sustaining morale and relational bonds among diasporic Hongkongers. Such interactions blurred the line between political practice and emotional maintenance, positioning care as a form of connective action.

Meanwhile, emotional resonance was not always about high intensity. For David, what mattered most was not whether someone had been deeply involved in the protests, but whether they shared a similar emotional orientation. "It's about resonance, not just intensity," they explained. "Even someone who was deeply involved in the protests might not feel most connected to me … But someone whose experience overlaps with mine—that's who I might feel closer to." This insight complicates assumptions about diasporic solidarity, showing how political identity is often shaped not by the depth of action but by shared affective positioning.

For others, however, emotional connection became simply overwhelming. Alex captured this embodied response: "When you watch *Revolution of Our Times* and cry through the entire film … Your body tells you, honestly—it's that clear … It's not something logic can explain." In such moments, affect became not just a signal of connection, but the ground upon which belonging was felt, viscerally, involuntarily, and without rational mediation. In a digitally tethered diaspora, emotional life was both a terrain of dis/connection and a site of quiet labor. Affective resonance bound people together, but it also demanded modulation. That is, knowing when to speak, when to stay silent, and how to protect one's emotional energy without losing the sense of shared struggle.

Across these three dimensions, diasporic Hong Kong organizers enacted their identification as an ongoing calibration of symbolic, social, and affective boundaries in response to perceived risks of repression, infrastructural constraints, and emotional capacities. Instead of being grounded in stable connection or continuous visibility, diasporic identification emerged through *relational distances*, referring to the situated decisions and contextual practices of disclosing, withdrawing, or re-attuning digital connections in the face of broader sociopolitical uncertainties.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we propose the adoption of dis/connective identification as a conceptual lens for understanding how diasporic Hongkongers negotiate belonging under risky conditions of transnational repression. Returning to our research questions, we show how diasporic actors sustain and negotiate identity-based relations (RQ1) through everyday practices of moralizing platform use symbolically, calibrating political security and social trust, and carefully expressing affective belonging. These relational practices reveal how dis/connective identification (RQ2) takes shape not through stable visibility, public recognition, or shared narratives, but through situated acts of selective dis/connection. Platform refusal, encryption layering, and curated silences are not signs of disengagement but relational forms of caution, care, and calibration that sustain cultural belonging, political alignment, and communal security of digital diaspora. Together, these practices maintain a diasporic presence in a hybrid media environment shaped by surveillance, infiltration, social mistrust, and emotional fatigue.

In addition to the dis/connective identification framework, our article makes three contributions to the literature.

First, our article contributes to digital diaspora and connective action studies by challenging the assumption of constant connectivity. In digital diaspora research, dominant models of collective identity emphasize coherence, visibility, and solidarity through symbolic and moral alignment (Brinkerhoff 2009). In contrast, dis/connective identification foregrounds how belonging is enacted through selective connection, infrastructural navigation, and affective calibration within hybrid media environments where uncertainty and potential harm prevail. The diasporic actors in this study sustain attachment not through collective frame alignment but through partial visibility, encrypted networks, and deliberate silence. Contextual relational distance, rather than coherence, anchors their sense of diasporic belonging.

Digital platforms, in this context, are not simply tools of expression but terrains of risk negotiation. Decisions to use Telegram over WeChat, or to withdraw from visibility altogether, are affective and political judgments about exposure, trust, and communal care. In his study of exiled Hongkongers after the Anti-ELAB protests, Ho (2025) describes after-care activism as a relational practice centered on care work and companionship within diasporic communities. Our findings resonate with this perspective, reframing diasporic identification as a calibrated socio-digital connectedness enacted through both emotional and infrastructural work (López-Gómez and Rodríguez-Giralt 2024). In our case, emotional work refers to managing one's or another's feelings in the process of

making, maintaining, and unmaking online mutual support and companionship in a distressing and risky context, whereas infrastructural work highlights the material work of tinkering with technology, along with the organizational efforts embedded in managing online relations of mutual support and companionship.

Second, our article contributes to disconnection studies by theorizing dis/connection as a relational and political practice instead of an individual withdrawal from digital life. Much existing scholarship focuses on digital detox, attention economies, or resistance to platform capitalism (Hesselberth 2018; Kaun 2021). Our findings show that for communities under repression, disconnection is not simply protective, but it is *constitutive* of identification. Curated silence, news avoidance, and encrypted messaging are affective strategies for navigating trauma and preserving communal ties. This challenges the binary that equates connection with presence and disconnection with absence. Instead, we propose risk-aware disconnection as a mode of connective agency, that is, a way of doing identification and politics that resists demands for visibility, coherence, and emotional transparency. Identification under constraint is not less political but *differently political*, enacted through subtle cues, negotiated absences, and calibrated trust and care.

Third, our analysis highlights the infrastructural dimensions of diasporic identification alongside the symbolic and affective. Digital infrastructures mediate not only what can be said but also what forms of identity can safely circulate. Choices around platform migration or silence are shaped by emotional resilience and technical conditions in response to repression. As such, digital diaspora scholarship must attend more closely to how media infrastructures shape the contours of relationality, belonging, and security that also extend to the existential aspects of diasporic subjectivities.

While our empirical analysis focuses on Hong Kong, the concept of dis/connective identification offers comparative insight into how other diasporic communities navigate activism under transnational repression and similar sociotechnical conditions. In his study of exiled activists from Middle East, Michaelsen (2024) shows how homeland regimes exert and escalate digital threats to destabilize networks and instill fear beyond immediate targets. Activists' reliance on digital media thus produces vulnerabilities and exposes sensitive information that state agents can weaponize to intimidate dissidents abroad as well as their contacts at homeland. In such contexts, negotiating dis/connective identification becomes both a survival tactic and an organizing strategy. Choices about online visibility, like whom to friend, like, or share with, demand a habitual assessing and balancing of repressive risk and symbolic alignment, thereby modulating affective atmospheres that "attend to those unpredictable affective encounters that cannot be traced back to the feelings or emotions of an individual or (national) group" (Stephens 2016, 185). Likewise, Moss (2021) demonstrates how political conflicts are often reproduced within diasporic groups, as exiled Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni communities inherited ideological and factional divisions from their home countries. Through the lens of dis/connective identification, such factional politics appear as practices of selective proximity that structure belonging and legitimacy amid sociopolitical uncertainties. On a broader scale, this comparative lens underscores the potential of dis/connective identification for studying digital diaspora mobilization in a datafied world, where connectivity itself becomes both a resource and a risk for diasporic community continuity.

Although in this article we advance a conceptual intervention into identification process in digital diaspora, it has limitations that call for further research. Our analysis centers on politically active, Cantonese-speaking diasporic Hongkongers, many with prior organizing experience and varying digital literacies. While offering rich insight into strategic dis/connection under risk, these findings may not capture the experiences of more ordinary migrants with different perceptions of threat or social position. Future research could expand this framework to include broader groups and adopt mixed-method or digital-mapping approaches to examine how infrastructural shifts affect diasporic communication and connection over time (Alinejad et al. 2019). Such methods would deepen understanding of the spatial and temporal contingencies shaping digital belonging across platforms and borders. In the end, amid a polarized and datafied world, diasporic identification is lived and felt in how carefully one stays connected. Silence, withdrawal, and cautious presence together mark the pulse of a community, as well as the precarious lives that endure it. Time, always, matters.

Author contributions

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Appendix A: Interviewee information

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Current residence	Type of organizing
Alex	50–60	M	US	Community organizing
David	20–30	M	Canada	Cultural organizing
Dorothy	<20	F	Canada	Student organizing
Jesper	50–60	M	US	Professional organizing
Keith	30–40	M	Canada	Political and cultural organizing
Luke	40–50	M	Canada	Professional organizing
Mary	20–30	F	Canada	Student organizing
Monica	20–30	F	Canada	Alumni organizing
Paul	60–70	M	Canada	Political and economic organizing
Rocky	40–50	M	UK	Community organizing
Roger	30–40	M	Taiwan	Cultural organizing
Susan	20–30	F	Canada	Student organizing
Thomas	40–50	M	Canada	Community organizing