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2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive Election: The Mediation of John Tsang's Campaign

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(Source: <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/03/14/all-poll-but-polls-show-john-tsang-is-the-most-popular-hong-kong-leadership-candidate/>)

About two decades ago, Silverstone (1999) already observed that people had been living in “a presentational culture in which appearance was reality” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 69) and his observation still stands true today. In fact, the media is a process of mediations which shape our experiences in perceiving the reality, and it constitutes front stages for us to identify and present ourselves, impress others and manage our social images, which explain that actions in the media are all mediated performances. In the recent 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election, according to various polls (Ng, 2017), one of the candidates John Tsang Chun-wah was the most popular while the other two – Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor and Woo Kwok-hing lagged behind. In this paper, I am going to analyze how Tsang constructed his trustworthy and sincere image through social media so as to obtain the most public approval.

Summary of Tsang's election campaign

Tsang kicked off his election campaign with the slogan “Trust, Unity, Hope” (Ng, 2017) and vowed to “rebuild trust, re-establish unity and rekindle hope” after years of political turmoil (Ng, 2017). Immediately afterwards, he created a Facebook page and a website named “Hong Kong Good Show”. He also launched a crowdfunding website which had raised more than HK\$3 million from 15,000 donors within 48 hours (Lau & Zhao, 2017). Then he posted a video of Mak Chai-kwong, ex-Secretary for Development and former aide to Lam, speaking of their friendship, which instantly

attracted many video views, on his Facebook page (Ng and Lau, 2017). Following the success of the video, Tsang's campaign team launched a series of support videos named "We walked this path together" featuring various public figures, family members, former subordinates and his campaign members, including DJ/MC/actor Sammy Leung Chi-kin, TV actress Flora Chan Wai-san, film director and producer Johnnie To, ex-leader of the Liberal Party James Tien, just to name a few (Hong Kong Good Show, 2017). Tsang was even backed by the movie superstar Chow Yun-fat during their encounter in a tofu cafe in Kowloon City (Kwok, 2017).

Tsang's campaign team turned the election battle to social media, and highly leveraged on Facebook to promote Tsang's trustworthy and sincere public image. For example, the team posted a video about Tsang's telephone chat with DJ Jan Lamb Hoi-fung, poking fun at Lam's campaign slogan of "We Connect" which is also the name of a sex toy app (The Stand News, 2017); Tsang even read out negative critics about himself to demonstrate his self-confidence by such self-deprecation.

To build up the final momentum, Tsang held a rally at Edinburgh Place, Central on the evening of 24 March 2017, two days before the election (John Tsang's Facebook, 2017). Thousands of supporters turned up, and Tsang gave a speech about reuniting Hong Kong and restoring people's hopes. It was a social media sensation that around 18,000 people watched the live rally on his Facebook page, and more than 13,000 comments were left on the page (Cheung and Chung, 2017).

Despite Tsang's defeat in the end, netizens still thanked him with 51,000 positive responses on his Facebook page, and his post-election speech was widely shared as many as 2,709 times and drew over 4,000 comments (John Tsang's Facebook page, 2017).

How Tsang constructs his trustworthiness

Trust, as defined by the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online (2017), is "to have confidence in somebody; to believe that somebody is good, sincere, honest, etc". Trust is the basis of the society and a society cannot properly function without a certain level of trust since it gives us a sense of personal security in the complex world (Silverstone,

1999). In the realm of politics, trust has emerged as a vital quality for any politicians to get support from their voters (Derhally, 2017). Yet, Silverstone states that trust has become a commodification in packaging politics as politicians have to market themselves to the voters, and brand themselves as trustworthy, which he calls this presidentialism. He says, “[I]t is often blamed on the media, on their role as both seducer of, and the seduced within, the political process” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 123), which points out that trust can be a form of mediation delivered by the media.

As suggested by Barnard (1968), subordinates have a zone of indifference in which they trust their supervisor to the extent that they are willing to do what he or she says without questioning the rationale for the order. Similarly, different supporters have different zones of indifference; the more they trust a candidate in an election, the larger zone of indifference they have, thus without questioning his trustworthiness (Figure 1). Therefore how Tsang’s mediation influences this zone of indifference is the most important. So he has to market himself as a trustworthy leader.

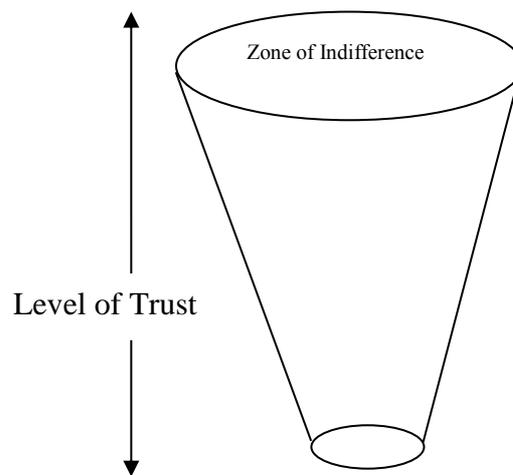


Figure 1: Zone of Indifference versus Level of Trust

In fact, the construction of Tsang’s trustworthiness could be traced back to two years before he declared his candidacy. In 2015, Tsang was savvy enough to adopt social media to connect the public like no other Hong Kong government officials. He was the first one to set up a blog to share his daily life and he created a Facebook account in February 2015 to communicate with the public, which built up a fan base of 54,000 followers last year (Ng et al., 2016). During his 2016-17 budget speech on 24 February

2016, he already mentioned Hong Kong core values and positioned himself as Hong Kong-oriented by injecting more money to boost local film industry but at the same time distanced himself from “localists” who condemned mainland tourists, which earned praise from the majority of Hong Kong people. His budget proposal of alleviating middle-class’s burdens also garnered the middle-class’s support (Wu, 2016). And Tsang publicly expressed his support for Hong Kong football team in the World Cup qualifier match against China in November 2015 by posting a picture of him watching the match (Kao, 2015). All these actions solicited good impressions from the public and promoted his local identity, which laid the groundwork for his image construction in the election when he amplified his local identity by eating local steamed rice rolls in Shum Shui Po, supporting local football team, visiting Golden Computer Centre which is a place of local culture landmarks (Cheung, 2016). Moreover, he did not shy away from talking the call for universal suffrage, a controversial topic concerning most Hong Kong people, especially for the pan-democrats and the younger generation (Jenkins, 2017). Through these performances, Tsang constructed his image as a genuine “Hong Kong boy” who shares a common identity and speaks the same language as other Hong Kong people to nurture trust in him.

Secondly, through his campaign advertising, Tsang tried to project togetherness by acting contrary to his self-interest. The Tsang’s campaign message “Instead of relying on a person, we should place our trust in the people. In unity, we shall rebuild hope in Hong Kong” could be heard repeatedly throughout his campaign. Rather than prompting himself, Tsang used “we” to create a sense of solidarity with ordinary people. At the same time, this brief message tapped into core values of his campaign slogan – ‘Trust, Unity, Hope’, in which people could find common ground, a mutual interest. The repetition of campaign slogans reinforced his image and messages in people’s minds.

To engage the public’s involvement, he later appealed to the audience in the “Support John Tsang CE Election Campaign Project” video that every dollar they donated signified the spirit of upholding Hong Kong’s unity instead of him as a person (Hong Kong Good Show, 2017). When Tsang said, “I am not alone in this campaign...I invited all Hongkongers to come on board and work with me on this together” (Ng and Lau,

2017), he once again fostered unity and togetherness for working towards a common goal. At the same time, he engaged in direct conversations with the public because everyone was invited to participate. As such, emotional connections between Tsang and his audience were established. His urge of the public for not placing trust in him but themselves also underlined the message that if the public believed in “the Hong Kong spirit”, they should believe in him because he is the man to “walk the path together” (Hong Kong Good Show, 2017) with Hong Kong people. The donation of HK\$5.5 million from Tsang’s 25,991 supporters reflected many people to share his vision (Ng and Chung, 2017). Tsang’s performance before and during the election campaign has, indeed, made his audience trust him. But is Tsang really sincere?

How Tsang constructs sincerity

Scannell (1996) raises the question of how a performer can communicate his or her sincerity in public as he proposes sincerity involves a performative paradox because “if a person’s behaviour is perceived by others as performance, it will be judged to be insincere, for sincerity presupposes, as its general condition, the absence of performance” (Scannell, 1996, p. 58).

Tsang’s success in mediating his trustworthiness helps construct his sincere image. Though Tsang may not be as sincere as he presents, his mastery of the performative paradox is able to construct his sincerity to be perceived as real through his success in establishing intimacy and his persuasive communication.

To mediate intimacy with the public, Tsang leveraged on Facebook, a social media platform, as his primary communication tool. His team constantly posted pictures and videos of him visiting local districts and meeting with different groups of people. These images and videos highlighted how Tsang interacted with the public and how he was mobbed by selfie-seeking supporters during his campaign activities. Of course these were public relations shows but Tsang intentionally arranged no media interviews or follow-ups to make his public presence more casual, real and natural. He also used Facebook Live to broadcast his bus rally. He read out negative criticism on him with a sense of humour, and he responded to online comments directly. In response to one of the comments by a netizen called Peter, Tsang replied, “Peter, my boss is actually you.

The 7.3 million people in Hong Kong are my bosses” (Siu, 2017). By calling out the netizen’s first name, Tsang was having a personal conversation with the netizen. Meanwhile, his response felt like talking to all 7.3 million people in Hong Kong. All these activities built intimacy between Tsang and the public. Intimacy, as Scannell (1996) suggested, can build trust in all kinds of interpersonal relationships.

Undoubtedly, Facebook is a key driving force behind Tsang’s campaign as it serves as a platform to mobilize audience’s agency (van Dijck, 2012). The technological setting of Facebook, as pointed out by van Dijck, steers users’ activities and preferences by encouraging them to join groups, share pictures and posts, and feeding them information based on their interests. All these actions construct connectivity and form an imagined community based on similar tastes and preferences. That explains how Tsang gathers many fan supports because every action Tsang’s followers make, whether giving likes, comments or sharing any posts, reinforces their common identity and build a community which satisfies their needs to be connected and represented.

In addition, Tsang’s videos about “We walked this path together” were a powerful form of persuasion. In the digital era when the boundaries between the public and the private spheres have become increasingly blurred, audience expects to see a public figure’s private life in tune with his or her public role. The popular public figures, the Tsang’s family, his former subordinates, campaign team members’ telling stories about Tsang’s character traits, working style and their interaction further mediated Tsang’s authenticity and highlighted his sincerity because the public tended to believe in the words of a third party. For example, in the video of Mak Chai-kwong speaking of how Tsang is the only government official helping him during his court case in 2013 was convincing. Mak said, “He saw me as a friend and not just a subordinate....In 2013 he personally wrote a letter to the court [requesting mitigation of my sentence]. I didn’t ask him to do this... I remain very grateful to him to this day” (Ng and Lau, 2017, p. 2).

Mak was once recommended by Lam as her successor for the position of Secretary for Development. Unfortunately, he stepped down from the position after 12 days of tenure owing to alleged fraud in housing subsidies. At that time, Lam publicly said she trusted him one hundred percent (RTHK News, 2017). However, Mak eventually endorsed Tsang. His endorsement was powerful because it highlighted Tsang’s integrity.

Remarks made by other influential public figures such as Johnnie To further created a positive perception about Tsang's image when To praised Tsang's "soft power" and ability to stay calm as a good problem solver (Kwok, 2017). All these heartfelt endorsements verified Tsang's sincerity that he was really what he said, and did not act to be what people wanted him to be.

Apart from building a sincere image, Tsang's speech during his bus rally on 24 March 2017 evoked public's unifying sentiment: "we are here to show our love for this city of ours... I hope the Election Committee (EC) members, who have the power to vote, would heed our call and heal the rift and make Hong Kong the home we imagined it should be" (Cheung and Chung, 2017, p. 1).

The persuasiveness of his speech can be gauged by Aristotle's "ingredients for persuasion": Pathos, Ethos and Logos (PathosEthosLogos.com, 2010). Logos is the base case made in an argument for the use of logic or reason; Pathos refers to appeals to audience emotions and for ethos, it is concerned with the persuader's credibility (PathosEthosLogos.com, 2010). In this case, I consider that both ethos and pathos are the most persuasive elements. People trust Tsang's words in the first place because they believe in his credibility. Tsang, in fact, is considered highly credible as he has held the position of Financial Secretary for more than 9 years and has never been involved in any scandal. Also, he managed to keep a stable economy with huge fiscal surplus. Moreover, his construction of trustworthiness and sincerity has made his words convincing. However, even though the audience trusts his words, he has to persuade them by appealing to their emotions, and I would say his message, bringing trust, unity and hope to Hong Kong, to find the common ground for his audience. His speech was carefully crafted, aimed at healing the divisions in our society by advising his supporters to uphold Hong Kong's core values. It mobilized audience's sentiment because the values connected their hearts and minds, especially after 5 years hardship brought about by Leung Chun-ying for his divisive governance (The Guardian, 2016). While Tsang expressed gratitude to his supporters, he called upon them for not going after personal worship. He said, "I don't see you as fans because I never see myself as an idol...I see you as an individual and I respect everyone of you...and I am just like you, a common man who will also make mistakes, so I invite you to walk this path together with me" (John Tsang's Facebook, 2017). Tsang's speech builds the common

touch, and as evidenced by the remark of his campaign assistant Julian Law Wing-chung, “instead of saying that Hong Kong people are supporting John Tsang, it’s better to say we are supporting the values that he represents: tolerance, belief in diversity, love for jokes, and the importance attached on systems” (Cheung and Chung, 2017). People believe Tsang is sincere because they believe in the core values he represents.

Aside from core values, I would also argue that Tsang succeeds in building an emotional bridge with the audience by constructing a collective dream, like what he said in the post-election speech, “dreaming was better than nothing” (Ng, 2017). His words have constructed the collective Hong Kong dream because the majority of Hongkongers have no right to vote for the Chief Executive. Tsang’s supporters, indeed, had wishful thinking that the public opinion might change the minds of the 1,200-EC member, most of whom would follow the instruction by the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong S.A.R. to vote for Carrie Lam. And their dream of taking part in the election and stopping Lam as the next Chief Executive was cast upon Tsang. Tsang’s words thus gave the supporters feelings of euphoria, sympathy and truthfulness. They believed in Tsang’s words because they built their personal dream on Tsang. Once his audience is convinced that he is the only trustworthy and sincere candidate who can help them realize their dream, they will not question him whether he will really keep his promise after being elected.

Conclusion

Entitling his campaign as “Hong Kong Good Show”, Tsang perhaps implies that the election campaign is merely a public show or a public performance because it is a usual practice that the election result is predetermined by the Chinese Government as those in the previous Chief Executive elections. Anyway, Tsang has put up a good show. Through his effective online advertising by social media and persuasive performances of promoting core values – trust, unity and hope, Tsang has managed the performative paradox successfully enough to construct a trustworthy and sincere image which is perceived as real, gaining tremendous public affection and support. Despite Tsang’s having acquired the highest popularity rating in the campaign, he was not elected, dashing his supporters’ hope that their voices will not be heard by the Chinese Government.

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