

Cyber Divided: How Taiwanese International Students Make Identity Boundaries within Social Network Sites

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ABSTRACT

Cyberspace has become a fixture of contemporary higher education institutions. When facing challenges seeking admission to a foreign university, international students often resort to online resources for guidance. By engaging in these online activities, international students develop a sense of community and identity. Despite recent advancement, existing studies on digital space and international students often fail to address the contentious nature of the community-forming process. Using digital ethnography and interviews, I studied an online forum for Taiwanese international students, STUDYABROAD, to delineate how social networking sites (SNSs) help reinforce group boundaries relating to different class traits and individual characteristics. International students find support and reassurance by socializing with netizen members and learning essential knowledge and information, but they also learn to distinguish different personalities and associate with them based on how they are perceived. By describing how Taiwanese students interpret online forums and develop norms around those communities, this study contributes to a growing strand of research into socialization of the international online community.

Keywords: boundary-making, identity, international students, social media; Social Network Sites (SNSs)

Received November 8, 2020; revised February 6, 2021; accepted June 19, 2021 8/16/21

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, scholars of international education have expressed increasing interest in the study of international students and the physical and virtual infrastructure supporting their mobility (Ngai, 2019; Wee, 2019). Previous studies have tended to link the migration of students to the reproduction of class in their home countries (Knight, 2004; Xiang & Shen, 2009). For many students the pursuit of higher education abroad has been a channel for upward mobility, a path for expanding career options and a means of acquiring social capital and preferential culture in the labor market (Ball et al., 1995; Waters & Leung, 2013; Xiang & Shen, 2009). New institutional arrangements and collaborations across national borders have contributed significantly to this global migration of students; examples of these new modalities include long-distance online learning, overseas branch campuses, and outbound-study programs (Hudzik, 2015; Madge et al., 2015). While past studies focused on school-level factors leading to international student mobility, few studies have extensively explored how the digitization of social lives has transformed the global college admission environment for international students.

Online communities have long served as a hub of information and resources in society, while simultaneously providing their members with essential affiliations (Golder & Macy, 2014). Their relevance has only increased in the interval, and they have become a perennial fixture of contemporary higher education institutions (Watkins, 2011). International students often turn to online sources for help when dealing with the challenges of applying to a foreign university. In the past few decades, online forums have become a significant source of information for international students seeking to study abroad (Madge et al., 2015; Ngai, 2019). Today, internet-mediated information exchange and interactive communities have become a central part of international students' university admissions and decision-making processes.

Since youth participation in online forums is both understandable and expected, researchers tend to ignore how such participation contributes to norm-building behaviors among international students (Ngai, 2019). Online community members are usually strangers, but while users in the community do not know each other, participants in online forums can generate meaningful solidarity—such as the international student peer networks discussed at length in this paper. These qualities enable online communities of international students to play a unique function as a public space for altruistic and reciprocal exchange, even when there is no apparent revenue attached to participation in the social network (Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Zhang et al., 2007). In other words, to understand the full context of global education, we need to consider how the internet serves as a transnational space which connects students' domestic and foreign lives.

By conducting in-depth ethnographic interviews with different online community members surrounding admission and study-abroad, I uncover how Taiwanese students construct their identities as students, having been socialized to incorporate the digital communities' moral frameworks. I found that individual students, participating in and analyzing the online forums, proceed to draw distinctions between various identity models. The evidence presented in this paper indicates that narratives in these forums regarding student identity and the group have a broader contextual meaning: specifically, students construct their status as international students based on assigned values relating to individuality and personal characteristics. As such, this research takes a step toward understanding how students construct identities and how students react to the blurring line between commercial and reciprocal exchange in online spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Online Participation

Existing literature on digital activity has taken two theoretical approaches to capture the motives and patterns of international students' participation in those online spaces (Collins, 2014; Matzat, 2009; Xiang & Shen, 2009). One group of scholars justifies the popularity of online spaces

with an "opportunity approach." These studies highlight how cyberspace has become a "space of opportunities" for international students to gain information and resources from various global education affiliations (Madge et al., 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009). These researchers believe that most international students lack cultural capital and social networks before studying abroad (Chung et al., 2018). In general, these studies celebrate the openness of online chatrooms, online bulletin board services, and SNSs that has broadened the range and scope of educational access and experience for international students. For international students, digital and virtual participation has become a vital life skill that shapes how they live and how they make decisions before moving abroad (Madge et al., 2009, 2015).

Prospective international students also look to forums to gather information absent from their immediate personal network (Bilecen & Faist, 2015; Ngai, 2019). For example, applicants who attended less academically rigorous schools may lack the social network which encourages peers to take the transnational education journey. Furthermore, young applicants living outside metropolitan areas may find it challenging to locate appropriate resources, information, and professional support regarding studying abroad. Internet communities tend to fill such vacancies. Additionally, students seek online forums to access international education resources and information that similarly are missing from their personal networks (Ngai, 2019).

Another group of researchers explains the importance of online spaces by imputing a "broker role approach." These studies define the brokerage role as a function that mediates between different parties, juggles the disparate activities and norms of organizations and individuals, and communicates various forms of knowledge and interests (Bilecen & Faist, 2015; Feng & Horta, 2021; Stovel & Shaw, 2012). Netizens and veteran participants in those online communities play the role of mentors, teaching prospective students how to develop individualized strategies, make practical choices, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their admission documents. These help-seeking behaviors make study-abroad discussion forums serve a function as expertise finders or expertise-location engines, which help locate those with the required competence to answer a question or solve a problem (Ngai, 2019).

Boundary-Making and Legitimacy of Online Communities

By participating in an online community, international students develop a shared sense of collective and individual identity. These qualities enable online communities to maintain a public space for altruistic and reciprocal exchange, even when there are no quantifiable positive outcomes for participants. For prospective international students, this shared sense of identity and community centers on different personal aspects, including social status, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, desire for information and experience, and mutual recognition (Cheng et al., 2014; Madge et al., 2009; Wee, 2019; Zhang et al., 2007). Simultaneously, for foreign students from more marginalized positions, cyberspace may also serve as a field of social resistance to the hegemonic power of Western nations' institutional and ideological influence (Chung et al., 2018; Ngai, 2019).

Despite the merit of these previous studies, prior scholars have often failed to address the contentious nature of the community-forming process—how and when these different international student identities and groups confront each other. While most researchers agree that cyberspace is essential for identity-formation and knowledge requests, this understanding tends to be limited to seeing online spaces as a neutral platform. However, newer research posits that online forums of international students in Taiwan constitute a dynamic social field where students encounter and debate their different identities (Tran, 2016; Tse & Waters, 2013). In addition to utilizing these sites as resources and affiliations, a student could also develop specific virtual conduct and set social boundaries against adversaries.

Boundary-making is a critical practice in online community participation. In a normative face-to-face encounter, physical presence is usually enough assurance that a member is committed to participating in the interaction. Physical interaction, therefore, rests on the premises of pre-

existing power dynamics and social status hierarchy, which follows a clear institutional or regulatory structure. However, online groups only partially follow these norms and rules. In online-mediated interactions, individuals can redefine their sense of identity and regain the sense of control which they have lost in everyday life (Cheng et al., 2014). For international students, redefining their position and expertise in online space helps them regain a sense of control in the uncertainty of the international application process (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Rui & Wang, 2015).

Prior studies of international student mobility have begun to direct attention to the cultural and social trends of “virtual cosmopolitanism” within academia (Kim, 2009, p. 200). The generation of tech-savvy, native netizen students has grown accustomed to sharing and exchanging information, goods, works, and ideas online (Kim, 2010; Wee, 2019). Middle- and working-class children have grown to depend on the internet and social networks to communicate time-sensitive information about fluctuating job markets, diverse educational opportunities and pedagogies, and culturally-specific standards and norms (Madge et al., 2009). Through participating in one or more social networking sites, international students interact in online communities populated by like-minded peers and expert-like individuals.

Despite the new generation’s familiarity with online community, students' online SNSs are unique in not being unified groups with coherent motives and the capacity for participation (Ngai, 2019). For example, open-access forums mean extensive opportunities for students to seek and interact with for-pay experts, such as admission consultants, editors, and “contract-cheating” providers (Lines, 2016). In stark contrast to the reciprocal help students receive on the SNSs, commercially-oriented actors charge a fee or commission for their assistance. While paid experts could likely be an invaluable source of knowledge, these commercial practices pose potential threats to the online community's goals for deliberative norms, as well as students' legitimate claims as independent, self-justified elites (Chen & Berman, 2022; Lines, 2016). With these considerations, it is unsurprising that many SNSs reject and disembark the market exchange and view the entrance of commercial actors as an unacceptable invasion.

International students are not alone in treating commercial actors as detrimental and dangerous to the integrity of their shared online community. While the practice of engaging with third-party actors in learning or doing specific tasks might not be characterized as inherently immoral, the consequence of the action is often associated with the demolition of altruistic behaviors. The market exchange thus “pollutes” the integrity and originality of the academic sphere. Previous studies applying this framework also discuss an alternate “moral legitimacy” promulgated by market actors that challenges how non-market actors construct, redefine, and stabilize boundaries along the “ethics” associated with varying economic activities.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

In this paper, I describe how interactions within online SNSs tend to facilitate identity boundaries and class discourses, specifically with discourse about individual merits. Mainly, I argue that students learned both how to mobilize transnationally and the “social distinction” about how one can become a transnational elite. The social distinction was a process that Bourdieu believes would significantly impact one's subjective and objective class privilege (Bourdieu, 1984; Tran, 2016). In this study, this distinction is applied to how international students develop particular expressions of taste and emotion, generate ways of acquiring knowledge, and learn patterns of consumption, any of which may potentially change their position and status in a given social environment (Bourdieu, 1984). Whereas contemporary research on the internet and international students tends to treat their class position as static, Bourdieu's theory helps focus the investigation on participation and the reproduction process behind creating boundaries between different identities (Deer, 2003).

This paper contributes to the existing literature on international student's online participation by exploring how Taiwanese students employ different justifications for discussing behavioral conduct relating to individual merits. Students make "social distinctions" between other cultural traits, motives, and tastes relating to economic and non-economic actors and practices in interactions and dialogue on online sharing sites. These distinctions exemplified the group's shared identity and the underlying individualism and merit-based logic behind distinguishing the true elite (Chen & Berman 2022). Taken together, this paper helps investigate the complexity of commercialization and the transforming nature of netizen culture in the international student identity-making process.

RESEARCH METHOD

The primary observation site for this research was a popular online-sharing forum and community used by Taiwanese international students and migrants: STUDYABROAD. I collected conversations and discussion threads on the forum and conducted interviews with actors who used the forum. STUDYABROAD uses a Bulletin Board System (BBS) and is one of the thousands of forum sections under its parent site PTT, a non-profit social networking site in Taiwan. The forum uses a discussion-thread structure, where users post a topic or question. Then other users participate in the discussion by posting their responses in the original post or starting another line of debate. A group of international student alumni founded STUDYABROAD in 2005 and, as of May 16th, 2021, it contains over 6,815 threads with over 14,000 entries and comments about student migration issues. Today, STUDYABROAD is one of the main sites where prospective Taiwanese international students consult before their migration and admission process.

To obtain a deeper understanding of how students experience, perceive, and navigate communication on the site, I used an ethnographic approach to collect "thick descriptions" of participant experience on STUDYABROAD (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Garcia et al., 2009). Following the conventional ethnographic approach, I began informal observation on the forum to obtain an insider look at the site without disturbing the community interaction. However, most veteran users of the forum acknowledged the "researcher-lurker" identity of my account. More systematic ethnographic work began in the summer of 2015 when I started to study the online-offline social life of Taiwanese international students. This study collects all online participant data for analysis regarding the dynamics and narratives around boundary-making in the online forum. Participating, communicating, and reciprocal exchange of information about studying abroad continued even when I was not studying the area, mirroring how a conventional offline ethnographer lives a dual life of both local and distance observer (Hallett & Barber, 2014).

STUDYABROAD predates any commercial social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) or social networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter), which makes it the most complete and representative online platform for Taiwanese international students and applicants to consult, exchange information and opinion, and interact with professional admission aids. To fully understand how members perceived the community and drew boundaries with each other, I supplemented observational data with 43 face-to-face interviews with participants on the forum. In the interviews, I asked the users to share with me their thoughts and experience on STUDYABROAD. I established a broad framework regarding different norms and dynamic identity types on the sites from these interviews. Following these conversations, I compared my transcripts with ethnographic notes. I later analyzed the corresponding codes and performed the analysis through the aid of MaxQDA, a computational qualitative software. Altogether, the multi-level fieldwork approach provided a holistic view of how individuals perceive and functionally connect to the online-sharing community.

FINDINGS

Seeking Reassurances

STUDYABROAD, as a community, values students who control their own fate and manage to acquire different resources while applying to schools abroad. Student participants praised individuals who shared information about their application process bluntly and honestly. At the same time, community members are active in teaching applicants how to acquire information selectively. Independence and self-learning are considered core characteristics for participating in the forum and appropriate socialization for becoming an international student.

In STUDYABROAD, solidarity is shown by expressing one's willingness to offer collaborations with old and new community members. One's commitment to engage with new applicants on the forum was perceived as a sign of loyalty to the community as a whole, as seen when members use words such as "supported" and "reinforced" to describe how forum members' experience sharing can make other students' journeys possible. One such example is a discussion thread posted in July 2015 titled: "Pay it Forward, Helping SOP, CV and Recommendation Letter," by alumni member H:

I helped so many people here [PTT] and want to pay it forward to other people. If someone is applying for 2016, they should already be starting the process of preparing their documents. I can help with Business School, and M.S. MBA is not my expertise, but I can try my best if you need me to. Please send an I.M. [internal message]. Free of charge. Please help three more Taiwanese in the future if you did receive my help. (Post 20150706).

Therefore, this member attributed the reason for collaboration with the new applicants not to a desire for the individual success but their commitment to providing for the success of the whole Taiwanese international student community. Such sentiment can also be found in an interview with one of the alumni forum members, an assistant professor at a public university in Taiwan. He described his willingness to offer help in the forum as a "responsibility to the community", stating:

I have been participating on this site for over a decade. Applying to a foreign school is hard work, emotionally and academically. You come to realize that you are not competing with your peers (Taiwanese) but helping each other out to overcome difficulties. It would help if you found someone you trust. I think sharing encourages us to talk about our experiences and problems without engaging in personal feelings. At least to me, this openness was essential during that time, knowing that I could turn to the community when I needed them, (Interview 20180908).

STUDYABROAD, an online community of international students, thus occupies a pivotal role in serving Taiwanese international students who face a significant milestone of success facing the uncertainty of admission. For new applicants and new members of the STUDYABROAD, these enthusiastic and motivated community veterans are essential information and experience resources. More importantly, the forum gives students the support, reassurance, and social networking opportunity that they may not get otherwise. For instance, a new applicant described how STUDYABROAD offered reassurances to her by supervising the process. Some students interviewed also mentioned that working with members of the forum reassured them because having an "expert" managing their application reduced their anxiety about making mistakes and ruining their future:

When I was still thinking about studying abroad, and I was always looking for advice from people. My classmates and teachers suggested that I go to STUDYABROAD because there are many people's experiences and ideas, and I wanted to see what real study abroad is like. I did not know these people, but the information and experiences

they shared gave me a better sense of who I am and what I want. It is good to have someone on top of everything helping you through the process, (Interview20170415).

The sense of reassurance was only one examples of the "organic" support students can get from seeking support from STUDYABROAD members. As Brooks and Waters (2011) described, the mobility of international students was also a "move for educational purposes and, in doing so, creates new networks and circuits of identity."(Brooks & Waters, 2011) While the consideration of the online international student community in terms of academic development has been a traditional focus, growing research has indicated that non-academic reasons such as migration, enhancement of personal network, and social transformation have become essential factors shaping international student mobility (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Tran, 2016). The fact that STUDYABROAD became so integral to student mobility highlighted the long-suspected role of global education mobility in pursuing forms of capital conversion and expansion of their cultural repertoire.

Consistent with previous research, Taiwanese students and netizens I interviewed also identified several reasons to seek help from STUDYABROAD (Matzat, 2009; Ngai, 2019). In addition to the feeling of emotional connectedness to other members, students expressed a wide variety of rationales for using a site like STUDYABROAD. Information has played a central role in deciding to consult the online community in transnational admission processes. In STUDYABROAD, as with global education admission more generally, information sharing is linked to the opportunity for access. Those who provide information about studying abroad act as a trustworthy "intermediary" because they can influence people's perceptions about studying abroad and offer or eliminate some of the available options:

By the time I [was] applying, I did not think I relied much on my professors and friends. Even though some of them have certainly used it before, they either do not know my field or their experience was a long time ago. I might just look [online] by myself"(Interview20160402).

When preparing to study abroad, a student can hypothetically turn to anyone for help for information- schoolteachers, parents, relatives, and peers. However, when those individuals fail to deliver timely and helpful advice, online websites and communities like STUDYABROAD become critical.

Delegitimization of alternative sources

However, STUDYABROAD is, by no means, a homogenous group. Within the rapidly expanding online network, internal cleavage between student migrants is readily apparent; divisions often occur along lines of generation, political orientation, and, most frequently, qualifications. Those who seek commercial help and admission assistance in the online community, for example, are often discredited. According to their value system, such boundaries distinguish the "true" international student community group from the others. The veteran STUDYABROAD members, for example, distinguished the more legitimate altruistic sharing, separating it from the information-sharing practices of commercial agents:

Commercial agents can do just as much as any of us. The only difference is that they have some "experience." By experience, I mean they could make an educated guess of where you might fit better. If you work hard enough, you could post a thread here, and the netizen will give all kinds of opinions. Altogether, we know more than your agent, (Post 20080706).

For community members, the practice of selling communication and services for a fee violates what they consider a crucial part of the online forum's standards. Moreover, the discussion foregrounds a belief that using commercial agents is deviant from the ideal practice of "becoming" international students. The forum's conventions often immediately label these individuals as lazy, and considers them to be lacking the ability to craft their own individualized pathways:

PPT [STUDYABROAD] usually discourages people from using commercial agents. They say if you want to be an international student, you should not do it. [K: Why do you think so?] I think they have a point. Many say if you cannot manage the process yourself, you are not independent enough to go abroad. In my view, using commercial agents to help with preparing their documents is just how lazy and rich people buy their way into studying abroad, not earning their way, (Interview 20160402).

This quote from a Taiwanese graduate student studying in the U.S. indicates the internal conflicts between free sharing of information and the concept of commercial agents in cyberspace. Although both "sources of information" provide the necessity, only the forum is considered legitimate. Essentially, the association with third-party, commercial actors disqualifies individuals from being part of the community. Many of the interviewees later revealed that they worked with agents but felt too ashamed to share such experiences. One of these, a former STEM Ph.D. student, shared their thoughts concerning this aspect of the forum:

They also said that if you cannot manage the process yourself, you are not independent enough to go abroad. In my view, this is only partly true. I would point out this: although some students are fortunate enough to have the resources available, some others require agents' help. Not all students using commercial agents are lazy rich people buying their way into studying abroad, (Post 20150514).

In turn, a cyber community such as STUDYABROAD facilitates a collective understanding of international students that favors "earned privilege" instead of "inherited privilege" as they seek their way to gain access to study abroad.

Identifying a similar pattern, Shamus Khan (2010) discusses elite boarding school children having to defend their legitimate privileges through a show of hard work, concerted effort and, most importantly, independent creation (S. Khan & Jerolmack, 2013; S. R. Khan, 2012). If they hire someone to supply these activities, their cultivated privilege was permanently tainted, and they could no longer claim elite status since their effort would now be considered artificial. In a close examination, students in the online communities draw a distinction between those who "can" and those who "cannot." According to this logic, those who find help through commercial providers are an invasion of the free-sharing culture of the community while those who seek help from the forum deserve praise. In this context, discussion about agents carries a stigma because, once students employ third-party aid, they lose their claim to be elite. In such cases, the students' online community orchestrates its own social and moral punishment for students associated with economic actors. In their privileged position, the community members see themselves as performing a function that paid services cannot replace.

The distinction between elite-conferring qualities was clearly defined, along with the influence of cyberspace on individual educational trajectories, perceptions, and opportunities. Forum purists believe that those who choose to use commercial agents immediately lose their basis for claiming ability to craft individual pathways and master information-glut in a global education market. Furthermore, they derided commercial agents as opportunists and scavengers who profit by exploiting students and parents for lacking pertinent information. Despite the general vilification of paid services, there is a notable exception to the explicit negative associations surrounding commercialized practice and organizations: use of language institutions, editing, and tutoring services to facilitate chances in the admission process. My evidence suggests that learning and paying for services relating to language preparation and document refinement does not assume the same negative connotations. Instead, the practice of hiring a professional editor to enhance one's application documents is strongly encouraged. Rather than as a sign of laziness, the community found the practice of hiring a professional editor or language tutor to be legitimate and expected:

Yeah. For American students, I sense that if they are trained from younger age till they are older, it is more likely for them to know the answers [for GREs]. However,

it is challenging for us to get the same sensitivity to read and write correctly. Yeah. When reading Chinese, we are more at ease because we lived the culture, but English is.... [K: Much harder?] Yeah, much harder. Moreover, we do not get a good score. Of course, some people can and will get good grades. However, for the most part, we try to avoid finding whatever means that help us with the exams, (Interview 20181116).

In contrast to the discussion of commercial agents, discussion of both language institutions and professional editors is not penalized in the forum. In reviewing STUDYABROAD for debate of language institutions and professional editors, I found that discussion highlight the interaction, instead of downplaying its commercial nature, and the forum post discussed the price range, credibility of the editor/ institutions/ tutors at length. One veteran netizen user responded to a post about hiring a commercial agent to express the opinion that language institutions and editors are more worthwhile:

If your English is not good enough, spend some money on EssayEdge/ TopAdmit/ or language editor seems more helpful. I tried, and these are pretty valid. These editors are pretty good at pointing out "The American Way" of thinking and articulating your work, (Interview 20181116).

The informant's comments and the netizen's responses acknowledge that English- a cultural capital resource in a transnational setting in addition to being a useful communicative tool complicates the interplay between information, social privilege, and cyberspace. Cyberspace, particularly international student networks, both expands and limits how one can manage and capitalize on their cultivated English ability and their cultural capital. Understanding the reproduction of embodied language capital is inextricably linked to how interactions in cyberspace feature openness and timeliness, creating social meaning in mobility and the experience of living abroad. One could quickly get access to various forms of information and resources online, free or paid. But only those characteristics that one invests the effort to "cultivate" through living experience and the actual application and online interaction process can manifest an accepted sign of social privilege.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, social scientists in various disciplines have shown growing interest in how physical communities and social interactions "coexist" with online space (Hallett and Barter 2014). For people worldwide, digital space has become an immutable constant that influences how they live, interact, and relate to others across international borders (Madge et al., 2015; Ngai, 2019; Tran, 2016). As information becomes more transparent and options for education more diverse, the study author generated a research question regarding the educational process of international students. For a growing number of social scientists, the existence of online platforms marks a seminal opportunity for studies of international students—not only in terms of whether and how research generates and limits educational opportunities but also in discovering the function education still plays in defining international students' role in global higher education (Madge et al., 2015; Tse & Waters, 2013).

The world is experiencing a significant increase in international students' applications at most major universities (Madge et al., 2015). Most studies on international students focus on either the macro or the micro factors that prevail in such transnational movements (Chung et al., 2018; Madge et al., 2009). As a result, relatively few studies have discussed how social media's changing nature, a meso-level infrastructure

connecting the macro and the micro factors, has renewed the global education institutional fields (Kim et al., 2009).

My fieldwork and analysis of the site and its participants reveal different modes of moralized boundaries among international students, particularly centered on ideas of individualism and merit (Chen & Berman 2022). I argue that the process of these students' identity-formation leads them to praise those whom they think are worthy and based on their signs of worthiness- independence, selfless sharing, and most importantly, loyalty to their elite peers. While performing this inculcation of value, the group also actively polices its membership by rejecting those without the same portfolio, particularly those hiring a third party to boost their applications. Notably, I showed that the boundary created between commercial and non-commercial help-seeking practices on the STUDYABROAD forums distinguishes different groups of students. In part, this study foregrounds the pressing need to incorporate interdisciplinary conversation about the emergence and persistence of cyberspace in international student migration. Notably, as the global higher education sphere is slowly shifting online, a transnational "field" emerges that facilitates and de-centralizes the monopoly of conventionally defined boundaries between social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). However, we have not fully understood how individuals socialize and interact with one another in such a nuanced, transnational, and virtual "field."

In this research, the manifestation and justification for differences of the privilege of "international students" for Taiwanese students and netizens go hand-in-hand—those who do or do not employ commercial agents, people who do or do not engage in charitable sharing information online, and those who are or are not willing to participate in the online group. Despite the fact that many of their de jure successes in admission could be considered upward mobility, the rules for the culturally elite nevertheless excludes these nonconforming students from being considered by the other students as de facto transnational elites (Chen & Berman 2022). Failing to conform to the norms diminishes ones' sense of valid elite-ness, particularly from the perspective of transnational mobility.

Through the discussion of this research, my paper contributes to three main conversations within this new emerging trend in literature about international student mobility and international migration literature in general. First, I argue that, increasingly, the process of "becoming mobile" is associated with the migrant student's engagement with the social network that gives shape and meaning to the actions themselves. This work is among the few to date to consider the influence of the internet on the process, perceptions, and experience of student migration and on their in-group formation. Through this focus, I address how Taiwanese students and their perceptions of "studying abroad" enable construction of class distinction through "learning" the norms of free-sharing and openness within the online community. My work also seeks to respond to the sociology of education in considering the interaction between social privilege and spatial mobility (Findlay et al., 2012; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003). It further builds on the insight of Xiang and Shen (2009) and Baas (2016) on the emerging literature on the international and cosmopolitan elite subject. I argue that researchers should consider cyberspace as a critical "transnational social space" that

facilitates and de-centralizes the monopoly of conventionally defined boundaries between social, economic, and cultural capital.

Additionally, my work builds on the theoretical debate between assimilation and transnationalism in studying the international student population. I contributed by describing how the benefit and prestige of Taiwanese students' perception of "studying abroad" was a product of active crafting of an individual subject, rather than simple assimilation or regression to a particular structural time/space context. I argue, along with Madge et al. (2015) and Baas (2016), that the conventional differentiation between "temporary" and "permanent" settlement on migration is not applicable for international students. Instead, my evidence renders more weight to the possibility that international students are "permanently mobile," constantly fluid, and dependent upon changes in cyberspace and other educational contexts (Baas 2016). I argue that this process is not only the product of the receiving country's regulations but rather the result of the proliferation of global resources, infrastructures, actors, and information. The result of this upheaval creates new social orders for mobile subjects and radicalizes the population that would otherwise remain stable, motivating them to undertake the international journey. This trend is accelerating migrant assimilation to new destinations more generally.

Finally, my work also contributes to the much-needed study of the connection between online communities and the international student group. This work seeks to enhance the study of online communities and information sites for international students by investigating how the characteristics of online-community participation contribute to international students' construction of transnational subjects, boundaries of knowledge, and their class identity. Many previous studies have investigated the critical role of SNSs sites that influence students' choice of study abroad destination and their identification of educational trajectories (Forbush & Foucault-Welles 2015; Rui & Wang 2015). However, most studies assume that the knowledge and online discussion associated with international studies is a coherent space- one that unites students of similar interests and class positions. However, the evidence in this study reveals that online participation shows distinctive patterns following students' different trajectories, class aspirations, and transnational identity construction. Most significantly, individual netizens of the online forums use formal and informal cues to significantly influence students' consideration of what constitutes a legitimate, authoritative source of information. Far from being a neutral tool of information transmission, online participation creates an active social space for "doing a social class." International students re-affirm and delimit group boundaries, acquire proper perspective and cultural taste, as well as gather emotional support and create a transnational network with alumni students to assimilate to the proper class position. In other words, they adopt the perception that is required for them to "enter" the role of being international students.

The pattern seen in this study illuminates how an online network can socialize its members and create group boundaries. Those who are socially positioned to benefit from it- particularly those "worthy elites" who hold the cultural capital that provides, without necessary recognizing, their inherited positions will create boundaries and community with others. Those who did not conform are viewed derogatively and seen as failing to perform the community's dominant identity form. Overall, this paper's evidence

supports the notion that identity-building and boundary-drawing in online sharing forums among Taiwanese students are highly dynamic. With international education becoming increasingly commercialized and market-oriented, it becomes more likely that student migrants will be increasingly sensitive to the drive to justify their status and identity according to the merit and the standards of the group with whom they associate (Golder & Macy, 2014b; Ngai, 2019; Tran, 2016).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

On the impact of cyberspace and online networks, most previous research generally agrees that the internet has played an increasingly significant role in global student higher education. However, opinions diverge regarding the pattern and motivation behind people's participation in those online spaces (Matzat, 2009). Some scholars believe that online sharing behaviors are motivated by an incentive to disseminate knowledge and information. Others are convinced that participation in online sites entrenches students' struggle to represent their identity and class distinctions.

One emerging challenge of the modern global education system is how academia deals with the burgeoning cultural and social trend of the "sharing economy" within academia. In the face of these new spatial-social dynamics, researchers now also face a new challenge in redefining international students' decision to study abroad as not a single decision but as a "permanent mobility" decision that spans a more extended period of their adult life (Baas, 2016). Future research should examine how this process affects their arrival and adjustment to life as international students and how it affects job hunting after earning a degree in the destination country. Also, more comparative research is needed for distinguishing different ethnically and linguistically-specific cyberspace environments involving international students. Researchers would also find inspiration by examining the microdynamics and educational stratification created by migrant students in online spaces, particularly their in-group orientation to ethnicity, class, sense of belonging, and self-naming behaviors (Gatson, 2011).

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