Social Media Sanctuaries: A Discourse Analysis of Indian International Students' Agency and Liminality During the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

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Abstract

This study employed a social media discourse analysis approach to illuminate the narratives of Indian international students in Ukraine affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war. We used agency and liminality as analytic lenses to highlight how this uniquely situated population utilized Facebook to navigate conflict, voice demands, support each other, challenge hegemonic narratives, (re)construct diasporic identities, and re-orient their futures. Findings indicate that Indian international students in Ukraine displayed insurmountable courage and resilience during the war, enacting agency from the margins to amplify their voices and actuate desired futures. Furthermore, South Asian students in Ukraine put aside their religious, ethnic, national, and caste conflicts to come together as a collective, uplifting each other and centering humanity. Little is known about how international students, especially in non-Anglocentric, peripheralized European countries, negotiate power and navigate crises during war. This study fills an important lacuna in the literature on internationalization, crisis migration, and higher education.

Keywords: Indian international students, migrant students, Russo-Ukrainian war, social media discourse analysis

У цьому дослідженні використовується аналіз дискурсу соціальних мереж, щоб висвітлити наративи іноземних студентів з Індії в Україні які потрапили у складні обставини російсько-української війни. Ми використали свободу волі та лімінальність як аналітичну лінзу, щоб висвітлити, як саме ця група іноземних студентів використовувала Facebook для орієнтування під час конфлікту, озвучення своїх вимог, підтримки один одного, щоб кинути виклик гегемоністським наративам, (ре)конструювання своєї діаспорної ідентичності та переорієнтації свого майбутнього. Індійські іноземні студенти в Україні продемонстрували нездоланну мужність і стійкість під час війни, застосовуючи свободу волі з маргінесу, щоб посилити свій голос і переорієнтовуються на бажане майбутнє. Крім того, студенти з Південної Азії в Україні відкладають свої релігійні, етнічні, національні та кастові конфлікти, щоб об'єднатися як колектив, підносячи один одного та зосереджуючись на людяності. Мало відомо про те, як іноземні студенти, особливо з неанглоцентричних європейських країн, шукаючи від влади рішень, долають кризи під час війни. Таким чином, це дослідження заповнює важливу прогалину у науковій літературі про інтернаціоналізацію, міжнародну освіту під час міграційної кризи.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of the most devastating crises in recent history (Awuah et al., 2022; Haque, et al., 2022). International students in Ukraine were uniquely affected, suffering personal, academic, and financial challenges as a result (Arif et al., 2022). Prior to the war, there were over 76,000 international students living in Ukraine (Ali, 2022), mainly from India, Morocco, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, and Turkey (Jain et al., 2022). When Russia invaded, students had to rush to safe locations, underground bunkers, and subway stations, some traveling long distances to reach the capital Kyiv or cross the border into neighboring countries (Jain et al., 2022). Their lives, which had earlier seemed ordinary, predictable, and placid, were held in suspension for an unknowable length of time, as they faced the uncertainty of a nebulous future which could include an eventual return to their home countries or exile (Morrice, 2022). There were approximately 18,000 international students from India in Ukraine, almost 24% of the total foreign student population in the country (Ukrainian State Center for International Education, 2020). The war caused a host of challenges for Indian international students, ranging from interruptions and truncations of their higher education degrees, scarcity of resources, to mental and physical harm (Ramamurthy, 2023; Roohi, 2022; Roy et al., 2022; Sarkar, 2022).

Indian students in Ukraine battled and braved fear, upheaval, disruption, dislocation, turmoil, debilitating uncertainty, and even loss of life and limb because of the war (Chakravorty, 2022; Purohit, 2023). Many of these students sought strength and solace through their struggles in communal spaces on social media, sharing information, resources, contacts, fundraisers, and posts of resilience. While refugee crises triggered by wars are not new, international students caught amidst armed conflicts are oftentimes an overlooked group in international higher education. There is also a gap in the literature regarding the creative power and agency of international students in Ukraine in the face of conflict-driven political, social, and economic transformations (Oleksiyenko & Shchepetylnykova, 2023). To our knowledge, there are few, if any, studies on the role of social media in offering safe, communal spaces for international students during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Our study addresses these gaps in knowledge by bringing into the limelight the lived experiences, sentiments, and struggles of Indian students in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War, as evident from their social media posts. We examine the limited liminal arena of the social media spaces of Indian international students in Ukraine, as well as the much larger liminal arena of Indian students' migration crisis in war-hit Ukraine.

As researchers working in solidarity with mobile people and condemning Russian aggression and occupation, we begin this inquiry by reflecting on our positionalities and considering questions around ethics and power, as recommended by Collins (2023). We then offer a conceptual framework, positing liminality and agency as valuable concepts for tracing Indian students' agentic responses to the dynamic changes within their environments. In the third section, we provide a literature review of the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Indian international students, and of the discursive and participatory possibilities afforded to migrants by social media. The fourth section lays out our method: a social media discourse analysis approach to analyze textual and graphic information dated from January 15, 2022, to April 15, 2023, within six Facebook groups of Indian nationals/students in Ukraine. In the fifth section, we offer our findings, which indicate that Indian students used Facebook groups to build community, affirm resilience, raise awareness, and advocate for safe passage and safer futures. We conclude with reflections, learnings, and insights into the sources of strength, hope, and endurance these students harnessed to continue their education, safe transport, and (re)settlement.

Positionality Statement

Our team was composed of a woman doctoral student of Indian (South Asian) origin studying in the U.S., a woman doctoral student of Ukrainian (East European) origin studying in the U.S., and a male senior American professor—a Fulbright Scholar who teaches higher education law and policy and conducts research on comparative and international higher education—at a large public U.S research university. As researchers, we are a part of the social world (Holmes, 2020) and recognize that our work, life experiences, and social-historical-geographic-political locations influence our position toward the subjects we study, the lenses we employ, and our expected outcomes. The three of us come from very different racial/ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds, and are also at different stages of our academic careers, and together, we

enriched perspectives and brought criticality and care into our conversations. We leaned into our lived experiences as educators and, for two of us, as diasporic international students, to add reflexivity to our analyses. We realize that knowledge is never value-neutral, and we explicitly chose to pursue value-based inquiry, acknowledging that our different values, principles, and ethical and geopolitical frameworks influence our understanding, decision-making, and perspectives. Researchers who acknowledge their subjectivity and lean into their capacities through personal experience and engagement are likely to find results that have greater depth of meaning and authenticity (Patton, 2014).

Literature Review

Impact on Indian International Students in Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine, there were over 20,000 Indian nationals in Ukraine, approximately 90 percent of whom were students, mostly medical students (Rastogi & Singh, 2022). Indian nationals comprise the largest group of international students in Ukraine, accounting for roughly 24 percent of the country's 76,000 international students (Hussain, 2022). As per a statement by Ministers of the Lok Sabha of India (2022), more than half of these Indian students were enrolled in universities in Eastern Ukraine that bordered Russia and were in the epicenter of the conflict. As the first signs of war loomed in Ukraine in February 2022, the first batch of around 470 students were evacuated through Romania (Chaudhury, 2022). One month into the war, as tensions escalated, over 4,000 more students were evacuated (Laskar, 2022), but a significant number remained stranded in Ukraine, many of whom used social media to frantically reach the Indian government and request safe transit (Venkatraman et al., 2022). Pardal et al. (2023) investigated the sentiments of Indians regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, using a social media sentiment analysis approach, and found that fear, anger, and sadness were amongst the top emotions expressed online, whereas positive posts expressed trust and anticipation that the war would end soon. Indians largely opposed the war and were fearful of its outcomes (Pardal et al., 2023).

Indian students stranded in Ukraine faced challenges related to their safety, well-being, food, shelter, and transport, which, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, took a toll on their mental health (Roy et al., 2022). Some relocated to other countries to continue their higher education (Ramamurthy, 2023). During the periods during which forced migrants are unable to move, they are often housed in camps, shelters, alien centers, and asylum homes, waiting in uncertainty as to when they will be able to continue onto their final destinations (Lenarčič & Medarić, 2023). As a result of airstrikes and shelling, 2,677 educational institutions were damaged, forcing over 130 institutions of higher education to be relocated (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022), with students in Ukraine's universities reporting deterioration of their psycho-emotional status, including depression, exhaustion, loneliness, fear, burnout, deprivation, and lower resilience as a result of the war (Kurapov et al., 2023). The war also claimed the lives of some bright and promising Indian students, such as Naveen Shekharappa, a final year medical student at the Kharkiv National Medical University, who was killed by Russian shelling when he ventured outside to buy food and water (Roohi, 2022).

The Indian government launched 'Operation Ganga,' a relatively successful and swift evacuation mission conducted through the efforts of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Indian Air Force, that brought back around 22,500 Indian citizens to India safely since February 24, 2022 (Bapat, 2022), with over 8,000 amongst them students and scholars (Tripura, 2022). However, many students who returned to India mid-studies faced bleak prospects, limbo, and career uncertainty in their home country (Sarkar, 2022). Yet others returned to war-torn Ukraine even after being evacuated, braving air raid sirens and the threats of missiles and drone attacks just to continue their higher education in Ukraine. They mostly resettled in cities like Lviv, Uzhgorod, and Ternopil in the west—within range of Russian air attacks but relatively removed from fighting in the east (Purohit, 2023). The transit migrations of Indian international students fleeing (and returning to) Ukraine can be regarded as what Collyer (2010) termed fragmented journeys, that are divided into several stages involving different circumstances, statuses, and living conditions. While migrant journeys are typically portrayed as linear movements between two places (Crawley & Jones, 2020), the journeys of Indian students escaping from and returning to Ukraine were often haphazard, convoluted, chaotic, and nonlinear (Singh, 2022).

Social Media as Discursive & Participatory Spaces for Migrants

In a globalized, trans-capitalist, and increasingly precarious world of mobility and migration, digital technologies have become significant to social organization and sociality, both within and across borders (Brudvig, 2019). As

international students live, work, and study away from their homelands, social media has become a major channel for them to contact their families and friends overseas with high efficiency and expeditiousness (Wu, 2023). The trend of phrases such as 'the connected migrant,' 'digital diaspora,' 'online diaspora,' and 'e-diaspora,' which often center agency, particularly of non-Caucasian communities from the Global South (Candidatu et al., 2019), reveals that diasporic communities are increasingly harnessing digital technologies to express themselves. Digital technologies can empower precariously positioned migrants (Kintominas et al., 2021; Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022), playing an instrumental role in their efforts to navigate arduous terrain, connect with migration industry actors (Gough & Gough, 2019; Ennaji & Bignami, 2019), deal with stress and homesickness (Wu, 2023), and facilitate 'unbordering' (Galis & Makrygianni, 2022). Migrants' digital configurations are webs of diasporas (Diminescu, 2008, 2012) and networked publics (Boyd, 2010), with important consequences in terms of public visibility and the mediation of identity (Diminescu & Loveluck, 2014).

Social media spaces in particular act as liminal spaces for migrants (Mitra & Evansluong, 2019), offering migrants the potential to empower and mobilize themselves (Zhao, 2017). Social media networks actively transform the nature of migration networks and thereby facilitate migration, offering migrants a rich source of insider knowledge on migration that is discrete and unofficial and making migrants savvier when undertaking migration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013). Witteborn (2019), conducting fieldwork with forced migrants through social media analysis, found that social media allows migrants to self-present, amplify their demands, and maintain sociality with members of other marginalized migrant groups. Gillespie et al. (2018) found that forced migrants often used smartphones and the internet to plan, navigate and document their journeys, maintain contact with loved ones, and enhance their visibility for survival, and the authors termed such articulation of digital and physical mobilities as 'digital passages.' While social media poses risks of government and corporate surveillance and the spread of right-wing ideologies (Krämer, 2017; Uldam, 2016), migrants are careful in their use of social media, validating the trustworthiness of news articles, cross-checking information with trusted social ties, triangulating information, and comparing information with their own experiences (Dekker et al., 2018).

Online communities reveal that the private and public are not separate, expanding the horizons of new grammars of subjectivity and experience (Marino, 2015), and function as transnational social spaces that enable transnational exchanges and transnational community and identity formations (Marino, 2015). Online communities empower migrants as they interact with each other, increasing their perceptions of themselves as collectives and allowing individuals to make visible their shared social and cultural identities (Marino, 2015). These spaces also allow migrants to engage in transnational ways of being and belonging (Nedelcu, 2018) and respond to the exclusions they face, undoing the mainstream discursive silencing of their subalternized lived experiences and centering voice and agency (Kaur-Gill, 2023). Social media can empower international students to curate content, create authentic narratives, collaborate, and communicate with each other, their wider university communities, and their home country support bases (Hughes, 2020), and bridge boundaries between their host country and home country identities and traverse different geographical, virtual, and cultural spaces (Sleeman et al., 2016). In this respect, social media can act as a scaffolding agent, allowing international students to identify strongly with their home and host countries simultaneously. There exists a need for more nuanced research on international students' acculturation and integration (Omori & Schwartz, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

We chose liminality and agency as our analytic lenses because both concepts offer insights into the experiences, challenges, and identities of individuals actively navigating novel cultural and social environments. Moreover, liminality and agency center de-homogenization, empowerment, transformation, movement, cultural negotiation, and self-subjectivation (the ways in which individuals negotiate power and constitute themselves through practices and discourse). The concept of liminality can help to generate a grounded understanding of how social actors, such as forced migrants and displaced international students, maneuver through socially complex, dynamic, and affectively demanding situations (Ybema et al., 2011), and facilitates an understanding of change and transformation in critical internationalization and migrant studies (Giaki & Arvanitis, 2021). The concept of agency can shed light on how individuals, including students, exert agentic responses to unforeseen and novel circumstances, navigate constraints to mobility, and transform their present and futures (Tran & Vu, 2018). Framing migrant students as agentive subjects ensures that we do not objectify them, deny

them voice / speak over them or for them, reduce them to victimhood, nor treat them simply as passive, static receptors of the forces acting upon them, but rather honor them as actors who (re)shape the forces around them.

Liminality

Liminality is a concept that originates from anthropology but, in contemporary usage, is widely used across a range of fields, including migration studies and internationalization. Liminality stems from the Latin word *limen* and was introduced as a concept by Van Gennep (1909/1960), who identified three stages in rites of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation. The liminal phase is the central and most significant stage, in which the subject in question has lost their old identity but has not yet been fully reincorporated with a new identity (Van Gennep, 1909/1960). Liminality, thus, is an in-between, marginalized, or hyphenated state (Adhikari, 2022), a threshold often crossed over as subjects move into new states of being (Beech, 2011; Eringfeld, 2020). According to Turner (1967, 1994), who built upon Van Gennep's work, liminality is an interstructural situation, a transition between relatively fixed or stable conditions (such as legal status, profession, academic calling, rank, or degree). Zahra (2019), documenting the hurdles faced by Rohingyas with regards to repatriation, explained that liminal subjects occupy a space between two clearly defined phases, statuses, or identities, neither fully part of the previous identity or status nor yet integrated into the new one.

Liminality can refer to suspended spaces (Janmyr & Knudsen, 2016) and to arbitrary, unfair, acute, unexpected, and imposed changes (Dunn, 2014). In the case of refugees and other displaced people, liminality denotes a 'permanent impermanence' that brings to light the increasingly protracted nature of exile, that often gives rise to ad hoc or makeshift arrangements put in place by governments, international bodies, and organizations, such as universities (Horst & Grabska, 2015). During liminality, individuals may experience a sense of solidarity with others in the liminal state. According to Turner (1994), liminal subjects often experience relatively undifferentiated comitas, i.e., community or even communion of equal individuals, in which the hierarchies and ranks between liminal subjects are dismantled. In other words, liminality offers liminal subjects a level plain to participate in, which is horizontal, nonhierarchical, and dedifferentiated in nature. The liminal phase, also and importantly, can be a time of introspection, self-discovery, learning, healing, belonging, and agentive subjectivity formation and self-actualization (Bloom & Goodnow, 2013; Dressman, 2002; Reckmans, 2023; Wu et al., 2020). Liminality involves 'becoming,' i.e., the (re)formulation of subjectivities (Simpson et al., 2010), and allows individuals to reflect on their pasts and prepare for (or even actively create) their futures.

Szakolczai (2015), describing liminality's analytic potential, emphasized the centrality of transformation and transition to the concept, explaining that after war, revolution, and other such crises that significantly alter the lives of everyone involved, liminality can lead to an understanding that such major events "literally and effectively transform the very mode of being of the individuals involved" (p. 30). For some, liminality manifests as a protracted, indeterminate journey that extends across their life course (Chakraborty, 2022), as exclusion and even criminalization (Torres & Wicks-Asbun, 2014), and/or as trauma through radically ungrouping (Tal, 1996). However, for many others, liminality offers a transformative, connective phase facilitating self-actualization, self-direction, and self-determination. Garsten (1999) described the liminal position as "a seedbed of cultural creativity, where old perspectives […] are contested and new ones created" (p. 601), signifying that it can be empowering, reparative, and radically creative. Because liminal subjects are in-between social structures and statuses, they are afforded the space to reflect, change positions, harness new avenues of growth, and alter the trajectories of their lives. Turner (1967) agreed that liminality is a stage of reflection that stimulates subjects to "think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them" (p. 105).

Agency

Agency dovetails with liminality and has been a central concept in disciplines ranging from psychology and sociology to organizational theory, each offering unique theoretical and empirical perspectives. Psychological perspectives define agency as a human capacity to act intentionally and through the exercise of free will but still within the influence of external forces (Braun et al., 2018; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Metcalfe et al., 2010; Neumann, 2006). We found Bandura's (1982) thoughts on the centrality of the self-efficacy mechanism in human agency to be particularly relevant. Bandura (1982), highlighting the social aspect of human agency, suggested that agency operates in a reciprocal rather than

unidirectional manner. Yanchar (2018), building upon this idea, posited that agency is contextual, practical, and ordinary; it is a thrown projection situated within meaning- and possibility-laden contexts of life and a free will of people to actuate possibilities intrinsic to those contexts. According to Giddens (1984), agency concerns an individual's ability 'to act otherwise', to intervene (or refrain from intervention) in situations, with the effect of influencing specific processes or states of affairs. Thus, agency refers to individuals' "double capability to be reflexive about their situation – their 'discursive consciousness' – and to act upon it to 'make a difference'" (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007, p. 1376).

 We grounded our understanding of Indian students' agency during the war in a sociological perspective, which puts human agency within the nexus of contextual, temporal, and structural aspects (Cavazzoni et al., 2022). In this regard, our conceptualization of agency is based on previous studies which view agency as a context-bound phenomenon subject to structural and power dynamics (Edwards, 2011; Mencutek, 2021; Ramos & Sarubbi, 2020; Yanchar, 2018). Sewell (1992) remarked that "a capacity for agency – for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively – is inherent in all humans" (p. 20). Agency captures individuals' desires, dreams, and goals that can serve as both sources of inspiration and direct forms of action that require knowledge and the ability to make the system work to an individual's or group's advantage (Ghorashi et al., 2018). For disempowered, de-privileged, and dis-resourced members of societies, such as racialized/ethnicized forced migrants, agency can also be about "having desires to play their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even destroy them" (Ortner, 2006, p. 147). According to Black intersectional feminist scholar Collins (1991), agency empowers individuals not aligned with hegemonic power to 'step aside,' i.e., step into the margins of discursive power and produce counter-narratives to dominant societal discourses.

 There exists rich scholarship on international students' agency across academic disciplines (Bond, 2019; Karlsen, 2014; O'Meara et al., 2014; Soltani & Tran, 2023; Sun & Wu, 2024) and institutional contexts (Bjork et al., 2020; Hou, 2023; Kim, 2024; Kuzhabekova & Amankulova, 2024; Mukhamejanova, 2019; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023). While many studies focus on the interplay of agency, context, and structure, the temporal dimension of agency is often overlooked. It remains largely unknown how international students' agency manifests itself with rapid changes during abrupt geopolitical shifts. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) reconceptualized agency "as a temporally embedded process of social engagement" informed by the past (in its habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) (p. 962). The authors posited that the key to grasping agency's dynamic possibilities is to view it as composed of myriad and changing orientations. In their examination of the literature on international students' agency, Inouye et al. (2022) likewise noted a predominantly "static conceptualization of agency, which limits capturing changes in agency and structure through higher education" (p. 16). Our study seeks to address these limitations.

Methodology

Data Collection

 This study employed a social media discourse analysis approach to analyze textual and graphic information dated from January 15, 2022, to April 15, 2023, within six Facebook groups of Indian nationals/students in Ukraine (refer to Table 1 for details). We were guided by the following research questions:
   a) What were the lived experiences of Indian international students in Ukraine during the initial stages of the Russo-Ukrainian war?
   b) What were the agency and resilience strategies employed by this population of students amidst the conflict, and how did these strategies manifest through their online interactions?

 We selected social media for two reasons: First, we found it challenging to communicate directly with international students during an ongoing conflict. Second, social media groups allowed us to access their voices, reflecting possibilities for international student agency within the impossible structures of war, violence, and exclusion. The groups were a mix of public and private groups, and the latter were accessed via membership. Additionally, two verified public diplomatic pages were also included as sites of analysis, i.e., "Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of India" and "India in Ukraine (Embassy of India, Ukraine)." The posts were manually organized and codified along themes (with posts in English, Hindi, and Ukrainian directly processed by us). We generated random pseudonyms using an online Indian name generator, which we

used in place of real names/account handles while coding data and documenting findings, in order to protect confidentiality. An ethical treatment of the data was assured by not storing any personally identifiable information. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Committee affiliated with our university, with our project qualifying for exempt review because of its minimal engagement with human subjects.

To respond to the possible subjectivity of this research and limit the influence of our own experiences and biases, multiple strategies were employed to achieve trustworthiness. First, review procedures for Facebook posts and data gathering criteria and protocols were developed by the research team. Second, in addition to posts by Indian students in Ukraine, we also included posts by the Indian and Ukrainian authorities, agencies, students' families, and alumni, as these provided 'thick context' (KhosraviNik, 2017), which were compiled into a database. Finally, two chains of notetaking were maintained during data collection: one with evidence and discussion notes on criteria for coding and database entry, and the other with reflective memos and notes with personal reactions. Additionally, we aimed at striking a balance between being an instrument of data collection and being empathetic to participants' opinion, views, and experiences through demonstration of our interest, respect, and attention. Eschewing an 'objective,' value-'neutral' research paradigm in favor of value-based inquiry can lead to findings which are meaningful and explanatory (Dobozy, 1999).

Table 1

Group demographics

Name of Group	# of Members	Nature	About
Indian Students in Ukraine	119	Public	This group is only to raise the voice of Indian students stranded in Ukraine.
Indians Students in Ukraine Group	~4,500	Private	-
Ukraine crisis Indian students	87	Public	This group is for all the Indian Students who went to study [in] Ukraine, their parents, and their future.
Indians in Ukraine	~2,000	Public	A[n] effort to unite [the] Indian community. To gather all the Indians who are living, studying in Ukraine. This site provides [a] platform to share information about life @ Ukraine. We pick up news and trends that make you live and enjoy Ukraine in its best way. Share your experience about work, studies, business, and enjoyment, [and] life in Ukraine. Let's share information about new rule changes, a hotel you visited, a cinema you saw..
Indians in Ukraine	66	Public	This group should collect all information relevant to the plight of thousands of Indians trapped in Ukraine and seeking immediate evacuation.
Indians in UKRAINE	~7,100	Private	This group is for INDIAN citizens who live in Ukraine (either for study or business.) We are planning for a get-together in cities like:- Kyiv, Kharkiv, Vinnitsa, Lviv, Odessa, Ternopil. Come together and build a group for our community.

Data Analysis

Zhao (2017) recommended digital ethnographic methods to study international students' lived experiences through the multiple ways international students integrate digital media technologies into their everyday lives. To examine the sentiments and online interactions of Indian international students during the Russo-Ukrainian war, we opted for critical

discourse analysis (CDA) as our method, viewing discourse as language-in-use (KhosraviNik, 2017). CDA can reveal new and alternative subjectivities, which can empower vulnerable individuals (Morgan, 2010), in this case, Indian international students who became forced migrants because of war. We ascertained historical and geo-political context, as gleaned from the literature and from our own lived experiences, and embedded our data into this context, while also engaging in continuous self-reflection while undertaking our research, as recommended by Reisigl and Wodak (2017). CDA considers discourse (such as the use of language in memes and tweets) as a form of social practice, implying a dialectic relationship between particular discursive events and the situations, institutions, and social structures that frame these events (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), which, in the case of our study, included the government agencies, nonprofits, media, universities, communities, and nations involved in the Ukrainian migration crisis.

Additionally, we referred to the steps outlined by KhosraviNik (2017) for conducting a social media critical discourse analysis (SM-CDA) using an observational/communicative practice-based approach. A SM-CDA follows a context-dependent, critical analysis of communicative practices/content with a socio-political critique level (KhosraviNik, 2017). A viable SM-CDA needs both a horizontal context which deals with the intertextuality among textual practices and a vertical context which links such micro-features to macro-level socio-political context of users (the 'thick' context) (KhosraviNik, 2017). We, thus, linked students' discursive practices (meaning-making processes) to the material sociopolitical contexts in which students were situated, as advised by KhosraviNik (2017). We regarded the students/users as co-consumers and co-producers of discourse, and regarded online language as dynamic, staying mindful of the nature, location, and dynamic of discursive power of social media and the fluid, changeable, and non-static nature of the interweb, as pointed out by KhosraviNik and Unger (2016). We looked closely at both texts and users' "lives and beliefs about what they do with their online writing" (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 167). The basic unit of our analysis, as advised by Barton and Lee (2013), was "the mediated action, which is effectively the practice where the text is used" (p. 14).

We used two cycles of coding—in vivo coding and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021)—to identify and analyze themes within the data, following Kozinets' (2010) advice that online research (netnography) employ a blend of "analytic coding with a blend of hermeneutic interpretation," i.e., thematic analysis (p. 124). Through in vivo coding, we used Facebook users' own words or phrases culled from the data to create descriptive labels (codes) for concepts, ideas, or phenomena, which allowed us to summarize segments of data. Through pattern coding, we grouped these summaries into a smaller number of themes, as advised by Saldaña (2021). Pattern coding helps condense large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units, develop major themes from the data, examine social networks and patterns of human relationships, and glean insights from the data (Miles et al., 2013). Through pattern coding, we collated similar first-level codes into inferential codes that identified emerging themes. Creswell (2012) clarified that themes are similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea. Data was manually coded and documented using Microsoft Excel.

Results

As Russia launched its invasion, Indian international students in Ukraine used social media, including Facebook groups, as a source of refuge. Students shared information, including updates on the conflict, safety measures, and other resources available to them, such as news articles, advisories from the Indian government, and personal experiences. These experiences were brought to the fore through media such as reels, tweets, and live streams in which Indian students (many of whom were stranded, awaiting help from the Indian government, and uncertain about the fate of their journeys) articulated their concerns. Group members shared safety tips and advice on how to navigate the crisis, such as evacuation routes and locations of local embassies and support services. Some members, including international students and non-resident Indians (NRIs) from Ukraine's neighboring countries, shared links to funds, volunteering services, food, accommodation, and/or transportation services to evacuate safely, find shelter, and/or get safely on flights bound for India. Some members also used these groups to seek assistance and tips related to immigration and visa issues and/or continuing their education in neighboring countries such as Georgia and Armenia. Our thematic analysis revealed four interrelated categories of agentic responses among Indian international students during the conflict, summarized below:

Voicing Concerns

Members expressed concern for Indian students stranded in Ukraine, bringing to light general worries about the safe transit of students amid the war and Ukraine's deteriorating security situation. There were mentions of depleting food stocks, violence, and beatings experienced by students at the border. As tensions escalated, messages expressed fear and alarm, such as this: "the city of Sumy was heavily bombed last night, hopefully the young Indian students got out in time. By now Russian troops will have taken the city." Many group members shared S.O.S. posts and appealed to the Indian government, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian embassy in Ukraine, to expedite evacuation, listen to the voices of stranded students, and provide them with necessary support in their hour of dire need. For instance, one reel, created by a female student and shared by various group members, alleged that Indian students were facing violence at the Romanian border, and that their cries were falling on deaf ears. In another reel, Indian students stranded at a railway station in Kyiv shared their anxieties, saying they felt hopeless, cut-off from their families, and desperate to go home, and such first-hand accounts of stranded students offered a glimpse into their distraught condition.

Some messages, including comments and replies to posts, expressed grief and condolences over the deaths of students, including Chandan Jindal, a medical student (originally from Punjab) who died of a stroke in Ukraine, and Naveen Shekharappa, a medical student (originally from Karnataka) who was killed from Russian shelling. A couple of messages alleged that local news channels in India could do more to cover the plight of Indian students in Ukraine, and that migrant students' calls for help were being overshadowed and obscured by lesser important news in India. One post encapsulated a common mobilization plea: "Let's help Indians who are trapped in Ukraine and need immediate evacuation." Other messages lauded the efforts of the Indian government and Operation Ganga to successfully orchestrate evacuations of Indian nationals and students. Overall, members emphasized the need to raise awareness and actively advocate for Indian students in Ukraine, issuing a collective clarion call to action.

A few parents of Indian students in Ukraine also shared their thoughts in these groups, worried about the safety and well-being of their children. For instance, a mother of a female student shared her apprehensions; her daughter was in her fourth year of her Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) degree, and the war had thrown the student's academic trajectory off course. Her mother shared: "As a parent of [... a] child sitting at home and waiting for a fight to end so that she can go back to study and complete her course, I feel lost and helpless for my child." A member responded that "our voice could remain a cry in the wilderness, but still, we need to speak out. Only then can we be heard, and solutions can come. So, speaking out is very essential." Apart from messages from students and their anxious parents, we also found messages from journalists (both freelance and affiliated with news networks), researchers, and filmmakers based in India and abroad, wishing to cover, study, and/or report on the condition of Indian students in Ukraine.

Sharing Information

Members circulated updates from the various Indian embassies situated in Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, and other countries neighboring Ukraine, by resharing/forwarding posts from the embassies' Facebook pages, Twitter profiles, and other channels. These updates included urgent advisories, required actions, and operating hours, reflecting efforts by the Indian authorities to assist citizens during the crisis. At many points during the crisis, the Indian embassy in Kyiv sent out various registration forms, directives, calls to action, information about teams dispatched to border checkpoints (Ukraine's crossing points with Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovak Republic), flight information, and 24x7 helpline numbers and email addresses, and this information, disseminated to coordinate the government's multipronged efforts, was passed around in various groups. Posts provided advice to Indian students, ranging from getting in touch with student contractors, not panicking, monitoring the embassy's updates closely, always carrying passports, carrying cash (in USD) for emergency expenses and other essentials, carrying COVID-19 vaccination certificates (if available), and pasting a prominent printout of the Indian Flag on vehicles and buses while traveling. Further, group members also circulated updates from Pakistan's embassy in Kyiv, revealing a heartwarming India-Pakistan unity during the crisis.

Second, members distributed information related to transportation, food trucks, and shelter. This included cab services (e.g., "recently published list of drivers in Ukraine and in Poland to/from the border"), train schedules (e.g., "evacuation trains from Kyiv to western Ukraine"), and bus schedules ("buses have been arranged [...] at Shehyni on the Ukraine border to take Indian citizens for transit entry into Poland"), as well as arrival and departure times of Ukraine relief flights to India. Many volunteers (including non-profit networks such as SOS Global Indians, and NRIs and expats) offered

to assist at borders and/or facilitate evacuation. One member shared that they had readied buses for an evacuation of Indian students from Lviv to Chop, onward to Budapest Airport, offering their WhatsApp details to connect. Another member posted a link to a Facebook group that offered free accommodation in Poland for Indian students and other foreign migrants fleeing Ukraine. Yet another group of volunteers, NRIs from the Czech Republic, were helping students stuck at borders, and their efforts were met with comments ranging from "so proud of you" to "god bless you." Another member posted: "I am arranging [a] community along with my network and they are ready with food/camps across borders in Poland. We will help you in all possible ways. Even my friends/followers can go and pick you up."

Third, members circulated information related to safe evacuation routes, including images of hand-drawn maps. One message laid out a safety protocol for students in active war zones, asking students in flats to stay alert, to avoid wearing headphones, and to go to basements or ground floors in case of sounds of war ("let's be extra careful, everyone stay inside"). Another message laid out an evacuation route through Hungary, including means to get a visa from officials enroute and catch a train through Záhony to Budapest, affirming "stay safe don't panic you will make it through!" Members also shared links to Google Drive folders with important resources, petitions, sign ups, fundraisers, and WhatsApp and Telegram chat links for students, emphasizing the importance of community support, safety, and coordination among Indian students and their networks. Comments included "let's focus [on] helping needy ones," "please post this on Twitter by using #indiansinukraine as it might reach more people," "done with the tweet, have we got any updates on the situation?" "how can I help?" and "can we connect more people to help? I would love to help."

Fourth, members circulated news articles, YouTube videos, and live streams from international and Indian (national and local) media outlets, such as BBC, NDTV, Indian Express, and WION, in languages including Hindi, English, Bihari, Bengali, and Punjabi. For instance, members shared news about the impact of war on Indian students in Ukraine (e.g., "Indian students trapped in Ukraine said they saw the scene of death with their own eyes," "Indian students stranded in Ukraine desperately seek help, pleading to be evacuated"), ongoing evacuations (e.g., "Russia to provide evacuation corridors amid India's students' worry," "Russia announces ceasefire for evacuations," "evacuation of civilians from Ukraine's Sumy underway," "all 694 Indian students stuck in Ukraine's Sumy moved out," "700 Indians evacuated from Sumy may board flight home"), and responses from politicians and the general public in India. Members also shared news about the resilience displayed by students during the crisis (e.g., "Indian medical students abroad join forces to help peers stranded in war-torn Ukraine") and resettlement (e.g., "good news for Ukraine return medical students"), seemingly in efforts to boost morale, celebrate victories, and keep hopes up and spirits buoyant.

Providing Emotional Support

Apart from institutional, discursive, and financial support, members also provided each other emotional support, articulating sentiments such as: "nice to see the group formed and helping each other" and "be safe, be strong." The data revealed efforts to create inclusive, embracing spaces for Indian students in Ukraine, with some group administrators (admins) initiating member introductions and invitations to connect. There were several messages of encouragement and togetherness, emphasizing unity and support and reassuring students that the situation would improve and that they should not lose hope. "Hello everyone. I know it's a difficult time for all of us. But we will find a way out together [...] We are all here for a cause. We are here to discuss our future together. We are not alone." Some messages also offered mental health resources. For instance, a psychologist shared free mental health resources via graphic posters, in a group, sharing tips to deal with stress and trauma. Additionally, the data included references to numerology, Vaastu, gemology, and fengshui, which seemed to be shared by private practitioners seeking to offer their services in alternative healing, rather than by students, but still tied into a broader theme of emotional restoration, recovery, revitalization, and renewal.

Displaying Solidarity Against War

Many members expressed strong anti-war sentiments and a desire for peace, with one message citing World Refugee Day as a call to action for solidarity with refugees. Members called for an end to the war and emphasized the importance of resolving conflicts through diplomacy and international cooperation. One of the groups (Indian Students in Ukraine) posted: "The voice of our country today! My country is Ukraine! [...] "We are sure that everything will be fine and peaceful. We have a strong army, good weapons, a serious and not cowardly president, and excellent international partners who have

supported us in difficult times." Some messages expressed optimism and prayers for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, reflecting a positive outlook and a belief in the ability to overcome challenges. Several messages addressed world leaders, including the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, and appealed for diplomatic efforts to end the war, with some individuals expressing willingness to offer solutions. Overall, group members largely condemned Russia's violence and displayed solidarity with Ukrainian resistance.

For instance, one member wrote: "STOP WAR IN UKRAINE. I am a common citizen of India and lover of world peace. I understand that the terrorism and wars are inhuman and kill millions of lives [...] I love the legends of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and A. P. J. Abdul Kalam for their greatest services to the world [...] Now, I appeal to [the] UN to add "Sustainable Development Goals No. 18: NO WAR." [...] I appeal [to] the developed countries to stop making war equipment and to stop buying and developing it and requesting you to divert the funds to [alternative development goals]. Love mother. Love nature. Love all lives. Love plants and flowers. Love animals. Love your neighbor. Love humanity and stop war [prayer emojis]." Another member asked groupmates "to spread awareness across the globe [and] document and tell about the crimes committed by the barbarian Russian invasion." Another implored: "I am asking for help in sending an anti-war appeal to as many ordinary Russians as possible [to] stop Putin." Another emphasized the brutal, destructive, and crippling nature of oppression, opining that "Russia's president did not build these buildings nor created the human lives that he is destroying. He should park his ego and call off the war." One member was even "willing to fund a private army to help Ukraine and its people as well as getting the Indian students out."

Some members demonstrated strong allegiance to their host country, saying "if I stay or study in Ukraine, I will go for war [...] to help Ukraine, because [international students] have to help the country where they stayed." Some expressed loyalty, patriotism, and gratitude toward their state government, national government, *and* host government, such as this student from Bihar: "I'm very grateful for helping us during evacuation by govt. of India, govt. of Bihar, and [the] people of Romania and Ukraine, without you this wouldn't be possible. Thanks for providing shelters, food, and other facilities." Members expressed their fear, sadness, joy, gratitude, and care through emojis of hearts, tears, anger, and hugs, and gained mileage through hashtags such as #studentsevacuation, #indiansinukraine, and #helpindians. One member even encouraged "Indians, let's urge Modiji to rescue all students from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka as well," and this message revealed empathy, enlightenment, and a profound acknowledgement of a shared humanity that transcends cultural, linguistic, and national borders.

Conclusion

Our study illuminated Indian international students' lived experiences through the Russo-Ukrainian war, revealing that social media networks can become places of refuge as well as platforms for visibility for international students. Indian international students in Ukraine occupy marginal spaces, as racialized immigrants, and found themselves doubly marginalized when they became forced migrants. They underwent harrowing displacements from their homes and universities, experienced disruptions of their academic pursuits, and feared for the safety of themselves and their loved ones. Nevertheless, Indian students in/fleeing/returning to Ukraine harnessed and exerted incredible agency from the margins, using Facebook groups to consolidate their efforts, share firsthand accounts of their journeys, make their voices heard, un/reborder boundaries, and pivot toward desired futures. Students displayed a range of strategies to navigate the challenges posed by the escalating conflict, including networking with relief volunteers and bodies, coordinating evacuation efforts, sharing critical information and updates, and advocating for collective rights and safety. These students resisted becoming pawns in larger geopolitical power games by centering their desires, articulating their demands, holding governments accountable, and reminding politicians (and the larger public) of the human costs of war. Their online interactions reflected urgency, solidarity, and resourcefulness in the face of Russia's dehumanizing invasion.

Our study also found that Indian international students put aside/bridged intergroup and intragroup animosities and tensions to prioritize collective well-being, goodwill, commiseration, and safety during this war. While Indians are sometimes divided on issues such as religious, caste, linguistic, and ethnic differences in their home country, we found that Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh students in Ukraine largely set aside their differences and potential biases (including neonationalist, brahmanical, and religio-ethnic supremacist ideological leanings) to mobilize group dynamics, center

common good, and deploy collective agency. We say "largely" because we did encounter a few posts that reflected Sikh and other critiques of the Hindutva ruling regime in India, stoking tensions. However, such instances were exceptions rather than the norm, as the overwhelming trend among students, whether Punjabi, Bihari, or Gujarati, was of unity and fraternity in the face of adversity. This brotherhood and amicability were also displayed between students from India and Pakistan, countries often portrayed and positioned as enemies by mainstream Indian media outlets and populist parties. These findings suggest that international students, particularly from the Global South, can put aside their intranational and interethnic otherings to center collective advocacy and praxis against external, exclusionary, and oppressive forces.

Discussion

Our study brought lesser-heard narratives of the Global South—stories of students in peripheralized European countries—into the limelight of international education inquiry and research, zooming into a uniquely-situated group facing uniquely-precarious circumstances during an active war. We learned how international students activated agency, enacting it within the present while simultaneously directing it towards the future. We found liminal spaces to be immensely agency-affirming and solidarity-fostering, especially where group agency is concerned. Because much of the literature on international students (including from the Global South) tends to focus on international students in predominantly Anglophone countries, international students in non-Anglophone countries become decentered, thus occupying a liminal space in the literature on international students and, more broadly, higher education. We suggest that scholars give voice and presence to international students in the periphery (including Global South students in Central and Eastern Europe), while affirming the dynamism, pluralism, and distinctiveness of their backgrounds. We also recommend follow-up studies to track the divergent education/career journeys, intellectual growth, and existential aspirations of Indian students who fled Ukraine, remained in India, returned to Ukraine, or migrated to other nations. We recommend ongoing research on social media as agentive liminal spaces for international students during genocide, conflict, and war.

Further, our study found that while migrant students are often bracketed as 'voluntary' or 'involuntary' migrants (Arar et al., 2022), international students fleeing the Ukraine migration crisis escape easy, sweeping definitions. While these students may have initially chosen to study in Ukraine somewhat voluntarily, the outbreak of war and the subsequent need to flee elsewhere challenged the simplicity of these classifications. Some of these students may have found themselves pressured by circumstances to continue their higher education in neighboring countries like Georgia and Armenia. Therefore, conventional classifications of migrants, such as "voluntary" and "involuntary," may not fully capture the complexity of studenthood in internationalization. We urge higher education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to rethink watertight categories of migrant student compartmentalization, and to abstain from generalizing or homogenizing international students. Instead, educators can honor the complexities, nuances, and intersectionalities of students' lived experiences and consider their multifaceted contexts and dynamic, shifting selfhoods. By being mindful of where international students are in their lives, where they are coming from, and where they are going (or unable to go), educators can cultivate empathy, nurture epistemic inclusion, and foster socio-politically responsive pedagogies.

Limitations

Our study encountered several limitations that may have impacted the depth and breadth of our findings. First, the active war situation in Ukraine and our research team's location in the U.S. posed significant logistical hurdles, making direct interviews with affected students impractical or impossible. This hindered our ability to fully capture the nuances of their trials and tribulations, allowing us access to only the edges of their experiences. Additionally, the black box algorithms and policies of social media platforms like Facebook can shape the visibility and accessibility of certain content, potentially biasing our analysis. Given the sensitive nature of the information shared during a crisis, students may have been hesitant to fully disclose their experiences on this platform. Furthermore, the supranational corporation, Meta (formerly Facebook), has been known to expose their users to risks such as surveillance and data privacy concerns, which may have caused further apprehensions on the part of students, when it comes to freely sharing their thoughts on Facebook. Lastly, focusing exclusively on Facebook overlooked potential insights from other platforms that students may have utilized during the crisis. These limitations highlight the need for future research to employ diverse methodologies and consider alternative data sources to obtain a more comprehensive picture of these students' lived realities.

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