Mobility and Connection: Media Practices of Chinese International Students and the Renegotiation of "Imagined Communities" in the Digital Age

By

Mingzhu Ouyang

Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Department of sociology and social anthropology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors:

Prof. Anna Lea Berg

Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram

Vienna, Austria

2025

Copyright Notice

[1]

[1] Icon by Font Awesome.https://fontawesome.com/

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Mingzhu Ouyang**, candidate for the MA degree in Department of sociology and social anthropology declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Media Practices of Chinese International Students and the Renegotiation of "Imagined Communities" in the Digital Age" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.

I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 18/06/2025

Mingzhu Ouyang

Abstract

This study provides an analysis of the social media practices of Chinese international students in Europe, investigating how they navigate transnational mobility and connection, experience profound shifts in student life, and renegotiate national belonging in the digital age. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" from 1983, this research explores how the distinct affordances of various social media platforms, including WeChat's role in maintaining intimate emotional ties with family, Weibo's function as a "public square" for engaging with national narratives, and Xiaohongshu's emergence as a space for lifestyle-oriented community building and information sharing, shape students' engagement with multiple, often coexisting or conflicting, "imagined communities".

Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Chinese students, the study reveals that these individuals are not passive receivers of media effects but active agents who strategically employ platforms to manage their "absent presence", construct connections, and perform identities. Key findings demonstrate that digital media have fundamentally reshaped the international student experience by: facilitating continuous connection, which can alleviate absence but also complicate presence; transforming daily life through altered information environments and social interaction patterns, including the challenges of a dual life and potential "information cocoons"; and creating new arenas where national belonging is materialized, for instance, through digital "simultaneity" rituals like "cloud New Year greetings" or collective responses to external threats such as the Sydney attacks[2] on

[2] The "Sydney Attacks" refer to a series of violent attack cases that occurred successively in Sydney, the capital of New South Wales, Australia, and its surrounding areas during May 2025. Most of the victims were of Chinese background. The incidents included random beatings, armed assaults, vandalism of residences and racial

Xiaohongshu, and challenged when encountering differing narratives like those on the Taiwan issue.

The research proposes a typology of "Transient" and "Integrated" students to explain variations in their media practices and orientations towards belonging. "Transient" students typically prioritize their home country's "imagined communities," relying heavily on Chinese domestic platforms and often defending national narratives when challenged. Conversely, "Integrated" students exhibit a greater openness to multiple "imagined communities," utilize a broader range of international and local platforms, and employ more reflective or pragmatic strategies when navigating conflicting narratives. However, these two types are more likely to be the two ends of a continuous spectrum, and most students may be at some point in the middle rather than simply choosing either one or the other. Students' orientations may change over time, due to changes in experiences or adjustments in personal plans. This study contributes to an extended understanding of Anderson's theory in the digital age, highlighting how specific media forms do not merely reinforce a singular national identity but foster a complex, fluid, and often tension-filled landscape of multiple belongings for transnational individuals.

discrimination verbal harassment. Although the Australian police have launched a criminal investigation into this and stated that it is not yet possible to confirm that all cases have clear racial motives, the incident is widely regarded in the media and public opinion as a manifestation of systematic discrimination and hate against Asians, especially the Chinese community.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my supervisors: Prof. Anna Lea Berg and Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram. I would like to thank Prof. Anna Lea Berg for her consistent encouragement and the sense of comfort she provided, which always made me feel warm and at ease. I am also very thankful to Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram for his detailed feedback and valuable advice, which were instrumental in shaping this research. My thanks also go to Prof. Andreas Dafinger for his kind concern and support the whole year. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful to all the members of my department of sociology and social anthropology for giving me so much support and tolerance.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to all the interviewees who generously shared their study abroad experiences with me. Their willingness to open up about both the joys and challenges of their lives provided invaluable insights for this research. Hearing their experiences was not only crucial for this thesis but also a personal comfort for me.

A very special thank you goes to language artist ZHANG. Her wonderful sense of humor brightened my days so much; I truly can't imagine how dull life in Vienna would have been without you. To all my wonderful friends in Vienna, there are too many to name, but you know who you are, thank you for making my time here so special and memorable. Lastly, I also want to thank myself for coming to Vienna. From the very first day I arrived, I received kindness and help from strangers. I have always been surrounded and cared for by so many kind and loving people, and I often feel incredibly fortunate.

Table of Contents

Introduction

S7 is widely recognized as a social butterfly and is at ease in the local social circle of Austria. I have marveled at his social skills many times on different occasions. Within just ten minutes of chatting with him at the school gate, four or five classmates and teachers of different nationalities greeted him warmly and had a lively chat for a while. When taking the subway, he can always run into acquaintances and chat happily for a long time. Everyone who knows him speaks highly of his social skills when they talk about him. His personal concerts are always packed, with many friends coming to show their support. He also manages his personal social media skillfully, there are always many comments and likes under his posts. However, during the last Christmas dinner, he said he wouldn't make any new friends, especially foreigners: "The more I chat with them, the more I realize we're from entirely different circles. I used to really want to fit in, but now I think it's unnecessary." This year, I also often saw him Posting Chinese poems expressing homesickness on his 24-hour Instagram Stories. There are quite a few, and it is even very common, Chinese students who initially seek a sense of belonging in Europe but later feel "tired". This leads me to wonder: In today's world where digital connections are everywhere, where do international students truly find their sense of belonging when living far from home? How do they navigate these multiple "worlds"?

In recent years, with the deepening of the trend of educational globalization and China's continuous opening up to the outside world, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has increased significantly, forming an increasingly large transnational mobile group.In the wave of globalization and transnational mobility, social media has become an indispensable

link for individuals to maintain social connections. For international students, a key transnational mobile group, social media not only breaks down temporal and geographical barriers, enabling them to achieve an "absent presence" with family and friends in their home country and receive emotional and material support, but also offers them opportunities to understand local culture and establish new social relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Recent studies, such as the findings of Hofhuis et al. (2023), have further confirmed that social media provides international students with a channel to maintain close contact with family and friends in their home country, alleviating their sense of loneliness and homesickness. This study focuses on Chinese international students in Europe, aiming to explore how they utilize and negotiate their social media practices within complex transnational contexts, drawing from topics of "connection," "changes in student life," and "the materialization or challenging of national belonging."

Previous research on international students has largely focused on the aspect of "cultural adaptation". While Forbush & Foucault-Welles (2016) found that social media enhanced Chinese students' adaptation through diverse social ties, this study further argues that social media is not merely adaptive but reshapes transnational student experiences at a deeper level. The continuous "connection" facilitated by social media is not only about maintaining existing ties; more significantly, it actively changes students' perceptions of distance and presence, fundamentally transforming the meaning of "being an international student." This continuous, almost real-time call from the home country's "imagined communities" might alleviate the discomfort of "absence," but it could also complicate the experience of "presence" in the host country.

This study employs Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" as its core analytical framework (Anderson,1983). Anderson's theory initially elucidated how print media shaped the communal imagination of nation-states, offers a highly insightful perspective for understanding how international students maintain, perceive, and even reshape their "imagined communities" relationships with their home country and other communities through social media. This research believes that Chinese international students' use of diverse social media platforms is not a simple instrumental choice but is deeply embedded in the dynamic process of establishing connections, experiencing fundamental lifestyle changes, and negotiating their national belonging within transnational digital spaces. They are no longer merely passive individuals adapting to new cultures but are active agents employing media to affect their connections, navigate changes, and perform their sense of belonging.

The core puzzle of this research stems from observations of the complexity of Chinese international students' transnational experiences in the digital age. On one hand, social media appears to offer students unprecedentedly convenient ways to maintain connections with their home country's "imagined communities" (Madianou & Miller, 2012). However, how does this continuous, mediated "connection," moving beyond simple tie maintenance, reshape their daily lives and transnational experiences? This is not merely a question of platform affordances but also concerns the exercise of students' individual agency. They are not passively adapting to new cultures; instead, they actively utilize media to manage and curate their social connections, positively navigate lifestyle changes, and negotiate their sense of belonging in this process.

On the other hand, while digital platforms strengthen a sense of national belonging, when individuals encounter global narratives that are inconsistent with or even directly conflict with their existing cognitive systems, these platforms may also transform into key fields that prompt complex adjustments to their sense of national belonging. National identity, as one of the core components of an individual's identity, often triggers cognitive and emotional responses in individuals when confronted with the impact of different information. This may lead to the questioning, re-examination, and reinforcement of their existing sense of belonging (for example, by seeking confirmation from homogeneous communities or making active defenses), or it might interact with other aspects of their identity and values, leading towards more hybrid or even contradictory identity formations.

In this study, the Taiwan issue serves as a prominent case for observing such dynamics. This issue was chosen not only because it touches upon core areas of national sovereignty and ethnic sentiment within mainstream narratives in mainland China, possessing a high degree of sensitivity and centrality, but also because expressions regarding Taiwan in international (especially Western) academic, media, and public discussions often exhibit significant differences from, or even opposition to, mainland China's official stance. Therefore, Chinese international students have a high probability of encountering such conflicting information in their overseas academic environments, on social media platforms, and in daily life. For many students, even if they anticipate differences in viewpoints, these encounters can still sometimes trigger their confusion, discomfort, or a degree of identity anxiety. This leads me to wonder: against this backdrop, how exactly is their national identity "materialized" challenged, or renegotiated and repositioned within their specific digital media practices?

Furthermore, how do the changes in student life driven by digital media, in turn influence how students perform their relationships with their home country's "imagined communities" and other potential communities? These changes are no longer merely an insignificant part of transnational life. Instead, they have become a core element shaping students' ways of connecting and their experiences of belonging. Previous research questions primarily focused on how students manage, maintain, or reconstruct their relationships with China as an "imagined communities" and with the socio-cultural environment of the host country (Kashima & Loh, 2006). This study, however, seeks to place "changes in student life" in a more prominent position. It considers these changes as both an outcome of how these relationships are constructed and a factor that shapes them.

Based on these perplexities, the main research question is: How do Chinese international students in Europe utilize and navigate diverse social media platforms to (re)construct connections and experience fundamental shifts in student life? Furthermore, how do they interpret or address their national belonging in the digital age, referencing Anderson's "imagined communities," particularly concerning how digital media foster multiple, potentially conflicting senses of belonging? For example, students may encounter differing narratives on international issues (e.g., China's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, contrasting with domestic media narratives like "China is committed to peaceful mediation") between their home country and those prevalent in their European host society or on international platforms. This requires them to manage self-presentation across different "imagined communities" while navigating varied, sometimes critical, perspectives and trying to maintain friendships. Such careful identity management, necessary for different "story

versions" of events across contexts, can lead to internal tension between upholding domestic narratives and integrating locally, thereby constituting a specific sense of conflicting belonging.To address this main question, this study will further explore the following sub-questions:

1. What specific media practices do students use to establish and maintain different types of "connections" with their home country, host country, and transnational communities? How do these practices differ across various platforms?

This question addresses the specific media practices Chinese international students use for diverse connections with their home country, host country, and transnational communities and how these practices vary across different social media platforms. In an era of pervasive digital media, actively managing social connections is fundamental to their overall cross-border experience, profoundly reshaping their perceptions of distance and presence beyond simple information transmission or emotional maintenance (Madianou & Miller, 2012). It is crucial to distinguish these media practices on platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, or Instagram, as each platform's unique affordances (e.g., visibility, persistence, searchability; boyd, 2010, 2014) offer users different ways to interact and build communities. These differences directly affect how students maintain a dual life, expand their social circles, and accumulate social capital. Therefore, examining these specific practices and platform differences can reveal student agency within participatory media culture and show how they weave and maintain social relationship networks across geographical boundaries.

2. How has the popularization of social media changed the daily lives, social interactions, and information environments of Chinese international students? In students' online

interactions, in what ways is national belonging "materialized," and under what circumstances is it "challenged"? How do these materializations and challenges reflect the complexity and multiplicity of their sense of belonging?

These questions address how social media have systematically changed Chinese international students' daily lives, social interactions, and information environments, and how, within these online interactions, national belonging is "materialized" and "challenged." "Materialization" involves the perception of abstract national belonging through concrete media practices, such as digital rituals (e.g., 'cloud New Year greetings' on WeChat) or collective responses to events (e.g., discussions on Xiaohongshu about overseas Chinese safety), transforming intangible 'community imagination' into visible participatory actions. Understanding these profound changes to life experiences, including managing a dual life amid transformed information flows and navigating challenges like potential "information cocoons" or tendencies towards homogeneous social circles, is crucial for grasping how students perceive and negotiate a sense of belonging in this context.

Thus, this study centrally examines how national belonging is "materialized" and "challenged" through specific media practices in students' online interactions. This reveals national belonging not as static, but as a dynamic process performed, negotiated, and reconstructed in practice, demonstrated by how abstract community imagination becomes tangible in observable and participatory digital actions and emotional resonances. Analyzing these micro-processes of "materialized" and "challenged" on digital platforms illuminates how international students navigate among multiple, sometimes overlapping and even conflicting,

"imagined communities," thereby revealing the fluidity and multi-faceted nature of belonging in the digital age.

3. How does Anderson's concept of the "imagined communities" help explain the complexity of these students' national belonging in digitally mediated transnational contexts? Specifically, how do the characteristics of different social media platforms shape their specific perceptions of China as an "imagined communities" ? For example, consider the closed nature of WeChat, the public square nature of Weibo, and the visual lifestyle sharing on Xiaohongshu. How might these platform characteristics give rise to multiple, coexisting, or even conflicting senses of belonging?

For example, on WeChat, international students interact privately with their families and friends. China is an "emotional home community" full of family affection and the care of acquaintances. On public platforms like Weibo, when they follow domestic hotspots and participate in discussions of national-level events (such as Olympic victories), China is more often imagined as a grand, unified and proud "national narrative community". On Xiaohongshu, by sharing and browsing refined lifestyles and consumption trends, China may be imagined as a modern, fashionable and dynamic "youth culture and consumption community". In contrast, when these international students use international platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, or come into contact with mainstream Western media, the image of "China" they encounter may be quite different. On these platforms, China may be more often presented as an otherized image that is highly controversial on international political and economic issues, has complex and diverse viewpoints, and even frequently faces scrutiny and criticism. For instance, holding a tough stance on the Taiwan issue, the human rights situation

is unsatisfactory, and its information environment and space for speech are limited, etc. When the European neighbor of the interviewer S5 in this article learned that he was from China, he opened his arms and shouted loudly, “Welcome to the Land of Freedom!” When S5 heard this, he found it both absurd and funny, and also felt a little angry. However, he couldn’t say a word and didn’t know how to respond. At this moment, S5 felt “neither able to refute nor willing to admit”. Such moments that make Chinese students studying abroad feel “embarrassed” are not uncommon. This prism-like presentation intensifies the complexity and potential inner conflicts of international students when they perceive and negotiate their sense of national belonging.

To deeply explore the complex connections, life changes and belonging negotiations that Chinese international students have experienced in the context of the digital age, this study mainly adopts qualitative research methods. The author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine Chinese international students who are currently studying or have studied in several European countries (as well as one in Australia). Through these interviews, this study aims to gain a first-hand understanding of their specific social media usage practices and how these practices shape their social connections, daily lives, and identities in a transnational context.

This thesis first reviews literature on international students’ evolving media use, establishing a theoretical foundation. It then details the theoretical framework, centered on Anderson’s “imagined communities” theory applied to digital media’s role in shaping multiple belongings, and outlines the qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews with Chinese students. Subsequent empirical chapters analyze students’ media adaptation and daily life changes, and

develop a typology of “Transient” and “Integrated” students, comparing their media practices and strategies for managing belonging. The conclusion synthesizes findings, addresses research questions, and discusses contributions, limitations, and future research.

While classical theories like Anderson’s explain nation-state formation through earlier media, digital technology, immediate information flow, and heightened mobility are reshaping these concepts, with social media altering how individuals connect and perceive communities, thereby blurring traditional national boundaries. This study focuses on Chinese international students, whose experiences navigating multiple digital platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, Instagram, Facebook) offer a empirical basis for observing how the “nation” becomes a continuously constructed concept, shaped by platform affordances and user practices into diverse “national imaginations”. Their unique position, marked by linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical differences, makes them an ideal “perspective case” for understanding the fluidity of national identity and belonging as dynamically constructed and influenced by digital media, where individuals are active agents negotiating multiple belongings. Thus, this research offers insights into how the “nation” is reimagined and national belonging is actively practiced in the contemporary globalized, digital media landscape.

Chapter 1: Literature Review: Media, Mobility, and Belonging in the Digital Age

This chapter aims to conduct a systematic review and analysis of the existing literature related to the core issues of this study: international students' media use, transnational mobility, and the construction of belonging in the digital age. The content will first trace the profound impact of the evolution of communication technology on international students' cross-border experiences, and compare the fundamental differences between the pre-digital era and the current digital era in terms of connection and maintenance, information acquisition, and social integration. Subsequently, this chapter will focus on exploring how the rise of participatory social media has reshaped the connection model between international students and their home countries' "imaginary communities", new paths and potential challenges for integrating into the host country's society, as well as the negotiation and performance process of their identity. By reviewing these literatures, this chapter aims to clarify the existing achievements and the space yet to be explored in the current research to understand how digital media complicate national belonging, particularly by fostering multiple and potentially conflicting communal imaginations, thereby laying a foundation for the theoretical framework and core research questions subsequently proposed in this study

1.1 The Evolution of International Students' Media Environment

The evolution of communication technologies has profoundly reshaped the international student experience. Understanding contemporary student transnational mobility and acculturation requires a historical perspective on how media environments have structured their social connections, information access, and social integration.

In the pre-digital era, maintaining ties with the home country was a deliberate and often costly endeavor. Communication primarily relied on asynchronous and infrequent methods, such as international letters that carried significant emotional weight but were subject to long delivery times, or expensive and typically brief scheduled international telephone calls. Access to news and cultural updates from home was similarly limited; information was usually relayed through newspapers and periodicals sent by relatives and friends, or obtained intensively during return visits, leading to a significant time lag in awareness of domestic affairs. Emotional support, though invaluable, was often delayed rather than immediate, relying more on memories, anticipation, and the infrequent rhythm of communication. This environment often intensified a sense of detachment from the social life of the home country (Sayad, 2004) and could lead to a unbalanced perception of domestic realities due to information asymmetry. Meanwhile, life in the host country relied more on local information sources and offline social networks. Students mainly obtained information from institutional channels such as universities and libraries, traditional mass media such as local newspapers, television and radio, or through face-to-face interaction and individual exploration. These methods became the key to obtaining deeply contextualized information and establishing initial social trust at that time due to the physical "co-presence" (Urry, 2002) they relied on. Building a social circle relies more on actual coexistence in classrooms, campus activities and community participation, which usually means that the expansion of social networks is relatively slow. For instance, Robertson (2013) found in her ethnographic study of Chinese students in Australian universities that students often expressed a sense of being excluded from mainstream student life, citing limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction and an

overwhelming reliance on formal and planned communication. Therefore, students often integrate into the local environment more directly and possibly more deeply out of necessity to meet their information and social needs (Kim, 2001).

The advent of the digital age, particularly the proliferation of social media platforms, has fundamentally altered these dynamics, initiating in an era of unprecedented abundant connectivity and user participation. Today, maintaining ties with the home country is facilitated by numerous instant messaging services (e.g., WeChat, WhatsApp) and multifunctional social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, Xiaohongshu). Information from the home country is almost instantly accessible, and emotional support can be received and given immediately and in various forms (Madianou & Miller, 2012). This shift has significantly compressed time-space distances. Students can more easily access information in the host country and use online platforms to accelerate and diversify the construction of their social circles. However, the changes driven by digital technology extend beyond mere improvements in information transmission efficiency and connectivity; they have also accelerated the "participatory" nature of social media. This fundamentally differs from the one-way communication model of traditional mass media, where audiences were passive recipients (Jenkins, 2006). Social media emphasizes User-Generated Content (UGC), interaction, and collective intelligence. Users are no longer just consumers of information but have also become producers, distributors, commentators, and co-creators. This shift from passive reception to active participation has profoundly reshaped the ways in which international students maintain ties with their home country, integrate into the host society, and construct their identities.

1.2 Participatory Media, the Complexity of Belonging, and Reimagining Communities in the Digital Age

Participatory media render home-country connections more dynamic and co-constructive. Students achieve a sense of co-presence through content creation and interaction, engaging with domestic public life to sustain belonging to home "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). Similarly, the participatory nature of social media offers new pathways for host society integration, allowing students to actively seek information, contribute to local discussions, and organize activities, thereby accumulating social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) and forming "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, 2001). However, these participatory affordances may also lead to selective engagement within homogenous cultural groups (boyd, 2010).

In identity negotiation, such participatory platforms become central "stages" (Goffman, 1959). Here, students strategically perform multiple identities for varied "audiences" (Papacharissi, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011), co-shape the meaning of their "imagined communities" through shared experiences, and receive interactive feedback that continuously molds their sense of self (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

For Chinese international students, media practices are particularly complex due to their engagement in at least two public spheres: Chinese domestic platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu) and international/local media common in the host country. This dual engagement complicates their transnational experiences, challenging earlier, more linear models of media effects on cultural adaptation (e.g., Kim, 1988, 2001). Current participatory

platforms, emphasizing user co-creation, foster multiple transnational ties and exposure to diverse narratives, leading not to a singular identity but to coexisting or conflicting "imagined communities" and senses of belonging. One of my interviewees, a Chinese international student who has lived in Europe for six years, is fluent in German and has no difficulty socializing with locals, has expressed his confusion to me many times. He mentioned that although he felt deeply integrated into the local society, his German friends still seemed to mainly regard him as "a Chinese" and particularly liked to forward various news or cultural content related to China to him on Instagram. However, this student admitted that he actually knows very little about many of the current situations in China. He only reads the content of European media and uses European social media. " Sometimes I'm not even sure where I truly belong".

The existing literature, therefore, calls for deeper exploration into the nuances of "connection," "change," and "belonging negotiation" in this context. Concepts like Anthias's (2002) "translocational positionality" highlight individuals' engagement with multiple, potentially conflicting, "imagined communities," which directly generates the complex sense of belonging this study addresses.

This complexity, stemming from simultaneous engagement with multiple "imagined communities" possessing potentially different norms and expectations, highlights the limitations of existing linear models of integration and underscores the need for a theoretical framework that can adequately address the nuances of belonging in the digital, transnational context. To this end, this study turns to Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities." When adapted to analyze the role of contemporary digital media and their

specific affordances, this theory offers a way through which to explore how Chinese international students navigate, construct, and experience these multiple and often fluid belongings.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology: "Imagined Communities" in the Digital Age, Their Media Forms, and the Complication of Belonging

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The core theoretical framework of this study is built upon Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities." In his classic work, Anderson proposed that a nation is essentially an "imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"(Anderson,1983). This imagination is possible because even if members of the community never meet, shared media forms allow them to perceive a collective belonging. In Anderson's discussion, these were primarily newspapers and novels brought about by "print capitalism." This complex media environment and the strategic practices of individuals within it present new theoretical challenges and research opportunities for understanding the national identity of international students, especially those from China. Anderson argued that the shared media forms such as newspapers and novels generated by print capitalism not only enabled members to perceive a profound and transcendent horizontal comradeship and collective belonging beyond daily experience even if they had never met before, but more importantly, these media created the "possibility" and "scale" for such large-scale communities to be imagined. Thus, the imagination of a community of a specific scale, a

nation, was “produced”. However, the “imaginary communities” constructed through media described by Anderson was not inherently perfectly unified or internally coherent; It is more like a social construct that needs to be constantly performed and continuously “assumed” by its members, and often interacts and even competes with other scales of belonging, such as local and regional affiliations. It was only in the later historical process and through the intervention of multiple political and social forces such as state power and the education system that this “imagined communities” of the nation gradually stabilized and gained a dominant position under specific circumstances. If print media historically played such a critical and foundational role in shaping national “imagined communities”, then in contemporary times, social media, which is characterized by immediacy, interactivity and strong visual communication capabilities, Undoubtedly, it provides a more convenient and profound channel for individuals in a transnational context to maintain, perceive and even reshape such and other types of “imagined communities”. However, the core argument of this study is that digital media do not simply replicate or reinforce a single “imagined communities.” Instead, through diverse platform affordances and user practices, they profoundly complicate how belonging is constructed. This often leads individuals to simultaneously perceive and maintain multiple “imagined communities.” These communities can sometimes overlap or even conflict, giving rise to a more fluid and tension-filled experience of belonging.

Applying Anderson’s theory to the digital age and focusing on the complication of belonging requires a deeper analysis. We need to examine how specific digital social media platforms

facilitate or shape students' particular perceptions and imaginations of China and other potential communities. This, in turn, can lead to multiple experiences of belonging:

First, "simultaneity" experiences in the digital age vary by platform characteristics, shaping immediate imaginations of different communities. Social media platforms commonly used by Chinese international students, such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, create new types of "simultaneity" experiences. This is no longer just about reading the same newspaper. Instead, students use various media content to track hot news topics from home in real-time. They participate in discussions on internet pop culture and experience important festive events together, like "cloud New Year greetings" on WeChat Moments during Spring Festival.

For example, Weibo is a popular microblogging and social media platform in China. Its significant "public square" nature makes it a primary venue for public issues and hot topics to develop and spread. It triggers large-scale "simultaneous" attention and discussion. By refreshing Weibo's hot search list, students can instantly sense the pulse of domestic public sentiment and areas of focus. This allows them to imagine a "national community" connected by these issues.

In contrast, WeChat is a dominant multi-functional platform in China, integrating instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment. Its inherent closed nature tends to create a more private "simultaneity" within circles of acquaintances. As interviewee S3 in this study stated, she would quickly find and watch a popular TV drama to participate in discussions with her friends in China in a WeChat group. To maintain a more intimate relationship, she chooses to video-call her boyfriend every day and her mother once a week. For S3, video

calling is an efficient way to cope with physical separation and to achieve a sense of "co-presence" (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

These "simultaneity" experiences, driven by specific platform characteristics, like private domains and public squares, can have a stronger and more concrete emotional impact and build greater community cohesion. This is because participation is not just passive consumption. It is an active co-creation and interaction based on the platform's interactive logic. The nature of User-Generated Content (UGC) further amplifies this. Students are not merely imagining communities based on media; they are actively shaping the media content that makes up this community. The form and spread of this content are deeply influenced by platform features, which in turn affects their imagination of that community.

Secondly, "imagination" is materialized through platform performances, and these may serve multiple community identities. On social media, students do not just "imagine" the community's existence. They actively "perform" their membership for an "imagined audience". Xiaohongshu is a social and content e-commerce platform popular among young Chinese people. It focuses on lifestyle sharing, fashion trends, and consumer experiences. Its highly visual and lifestyle-oriented features encourage users to share daily life through polished pictures and Vlogs. When students post a "Europe Study Life Vlog" on Xiaohongshu, they are not merely documenting their personal lives. Rather, they are engaging in a form of self-presentation through the identity of a "Chinese international student." The visual narratives embedded in these posts, such as polished images, visits to iconic sites, food tastings, or classroom scenes, function as ritualized performances of identity. These narratives

use familiar symbols and language, such as the colloquial term Liuzi (a playful nickname for international students), to evoke a shared sense of recognition among viewers.

The interactive features of the platform, including likes, comments, and shares, also create a sense of presence and participation that strengthens emotional ties within the imagined group. This imagined community does not require face-to-face interaction but is formed through mutual recognition of shared identity and its ongoing performance in digital spaces.

Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined communities" offers a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. While Anderson originally discussed nations as imagined through print media, this framework can be extended to social media contexts where users form transnational communities through visual storytelling and networked interaction.

In contrast to print-based imagination, platforms like Xiaohongshu enable more immediate and immersive forms of identity performance. Students may present themselves as part of a "Liuzi community" on Xiaohongshu, while simultaneously performing identities such as "international student" or "student of X University" on platforms like Facebook or Instagram, thus participating in multiple imagined communities across different digital spaces. This kind of performative participation represents a contemporary extension of Anderson's theory, illustrating how digital affordances shape the way identity and community are imagined in the age of global mobility and social media.

Compared to other students, Chinese international students are unique because they are frequently active in at least two public spheres of information or discourse. Therefore, multiple and overlapping "imagined communities" can coexist due to platform segregation, potentially complicating their sense of belonging. They maintain connections with China as

an “imagined communities” through platforms with Chinese socio-cultural characteristics, like WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. Meanwhile, they are in the host country’s media environment and may use platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp to engage with local public discourse and cultural practices.

Different platform characteristics often lead them to host different types and aspects of “imagined communities.” For instance, WeChat’s strong relational ties and privacy make it suitable for maintaining a core “imagined communities” of family and close friends, conveying deep emotional support. Weibo’s openness and media attributes might connect more to “imagined communities” around grander narratives like the nation or society. Xiaohongshu could construct a “lifestyle community” based on shared cultural tastes and consumption habits. Facebook or internal university platforms might link to academic or local social “imagined communities.”

This means students may navigate not just a single national “imagined communities,” but multiple ones that can overlap or even conflict (e.g., home country communities, host country communities, overseas Chinese communities, transnational interest groups). The specific forms of these communities are deeply influenced by the characteristics of the platforms used. The coexistence and interaction of these multiple belongings are a core manifestation of the complexity of belonging in the digital age. Anderson’s theory initially focused on a single national community. This study aims to extend it to understand the complexity of these multiple belongings mediated by different platforms.

I will apply this Anderson theory, which has been deepened through the analysis of the context and media forms of the digital age, especially focusing on how digital media leads to

the perception of multiple, coexisting and potentially conflicting “imagined communities”, and thereby complicates the construction of a sense of belonging. I will take this as the core perspective to analyze the specific manifestations of “connection”, “changes in the lives of international students” and “sense of national belonging” in the empirical data, aiming to reveal the complexity and fluidity of the sense of belonging experience of Chinese international students in cross-border digital life, as well as how the diverse communities they “imagine” are shaped by the specific social media platforms they use.

2.2 Research Methodology

Based on the questions outlined above, this study primarily uses the in-depth interview method. In-depth interviews allow researchers to examine the life situations of specific groups from the interviewees’ personal perspectives. This method is valued for gaining deeper understanding and insights and is widely used in research on transnational mobile groups (Peng, 2016). The main objective of this study is to explore how Chinese international students in Europe, in the digital age, utilize and negotiate their social media practices. This includes how they (re)construct connections, experience lifestyle changes, and interpret or articulate their stance on national belonging by referencing Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities.” To achieve this, the study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine Chinese students. These students are currently studying or have previously studied in Europe (and Australia).

All interviews were scheduled to take place in April and May 2025. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Initially, I contacted some students who met the research criteria

through academic networks and personal referrals. To ensure the breadth of the research sample and avoid potential sampling bias, researchers later recruited additional participants. This was done through the social media platform Xiaohongshu and by using snowball sampling.

The study ensured diversity among participants. This diversity covered their study abroad destinations, majors, educational levels, genders, ages, and the length of time they had lived abroad. The aim was to capture the complexity of media practices and identity negotiation among Chinese international students more comprehensively. It also aimed to avoid biases in research conclusions that could arise from a homogenous sample. Specifically, details of the interview participants (S1-S9) in this study can be found in Table 1:

Table 1: Basic Information of Interviewees

			Study Abroad			Interview
No.	Gender	Age	Country	Major	Education	Method
S1	Male	31	Austria	Communication	Master	Face-to-face
S2	Male	24	Austria	Vocal Performance	Bachelor	Face-to-face
S3	Male	23	UK	Social Work	Master	Video
S4	Female	27	Austria	Gender Studies	Master	Face-to-face
S5	Male	25	Austria	Computer Science	Bachelor	Face-to-face
S6	Female	26	Germany	Accordion Performance	PhD	Face-to-face
S7	Male	23	Austria	Piano Performance	Bachelor	Face-to-face
S8	Male	29	Italy	Painting	Master	Video
S9	Female	25	Australia	International Business	Master	Video

The interview method varied based on the interviewee's location and personal preference. For participants in the same city or those available for offline meetings (S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, S7), interviews took place in a quiet setting. These locations, such as a café or a residential apartment, were mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the interviewee. For participants in other regions (S3, S8, S9), interviews were conducted via online video conferencing, such as WeChat video. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese.

This study strictly adhered to academic research ethics, ensuring participant respect and protection. Before interviews, participants received detailed information (research purpose, interview content, data confidentiality principles) and gave explicit informed consent for audio recording; recordings were transcribed verbatim and meticulously checked for accuracy.

The semi-structured interview questions, designed around the study's core themes, explored three main areas. Firstly, they covered the interviewee's basic study abroad situation, including motivations for studying abroad, daily life, interpersonal relationships, and their attitudes towards the host country's society and culture. Secondly, questions focused on social media usage practices and strategies, such as which social media platforms they used in China before going abroad, strategic adjustments to their social media use after arriving abroad, any further adjustments made during their study abroad period, and the roles specific social media platforms played in their lives as students abroad. Finally, the interviews addressed the negotiation of identity and national belonging, examining how information on social media affected their feelings towards and identification with their home country, and how students

typically reacted when encountering sensitive information or discussions abroad related to , including social media's role in these situations.

Through this interview design, the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how Chinese international students' media practices in the digital age shape their transnational connections, life experiences, and the process of negotiating belonging within multiple "imagined communities".

Chapter 3: Digital Media Practices and Social Connection in Transnational Student Life

This chapter aims to present and analyze the research findings. It will cover Chinese international students' media use, how they establish and maintain social connections, and how the digital environment leads to adaptations and changes in their lives. This chapter will particularly focus on how different social media platform characteristics influence students' media practices. It will also examine how these practices shape their perceptions of and connections with various "imagined communities," and how these multiple connections reflect the complexity of their sense of belonging.

3.1 Life Adaptation and the Establishment of Multiple Emotional Connections

The study found that during the crucial adaptation period when students first arrived in Europe, social media platforms from their home country played a vital role, especially WeChat. For many students, WeChat's convenient instant messaging and its high adoption rate within the Chinese community made it the primary channel for maintaining instant contact with family and friends in China. It was also their main source for obtaining emotional support. As S3 stated: "When I first arrived, I felt like I didn't understand anything and was very lonely. I had to video call my parents every day; WeChat was my only comfort at that time". This "connection" function of WeChat was not just about information transmission. More importantly, through forms like private conversations and sharing on Moments, it maintained an emotional bond with their closest relations. Instinctively, during this vulnerable initial period, international students feel a pressing need to maintain these connections. Social platforms like WeChat, which are based on relationships among

acquaintances, have become the key channels for them to overcome spatio-temporal barriers and maintain close ties with their primary support communities such as family and close friends. Through continuous interaction and sharing, they were able to reconstruct a sense of "co-presence" with these important others in a foreign land. This specific and personalized emotional connection with known individuals and the confirmation of stable relationships constitute an important cornerstone of their emotional security in an unfamiliar environment.

At the same time, driven by practical needs, almost all students quickly began to engage with and use social media and applications common in the host country or used internationally. For example, WhatsApp was downloaded and used by most students due to its prevalence in communication for university courses in Europe; utilitarian apps like Google Maps, local transport apps, and banking apps also became essential for daily life. However, beyond this functional use, students exhibited individual differences in the depth and breadth of their exploration of the new media environment.

For Chinese international students, platforms like Xiaohongshu and WeChat Moments have become core spaces. Here, they actively participate in co-constructing their home country's "imagined communities". However, the communal imaginations shaped by different platforms and the sense of belonging they carry also vary. Students are no longer just passive receivers of information. As mentioned in the literature review, they are producers, distributors, commentators, and co-creators. Students share "Europe Study Life Vlogs" or "Guides for Avoiding Pitfalls" on Xiaohongshu. They document daily life with rich texts and images on WeChat Moments, anticipating likes and comments from relatives and friends in China. Due to platform characteristics, these behaviors present different dimensions of

"imagination" and point towards the possibility of multiple belongings. Sharing on WeChat Moments primarily targets circles of acquaintances. Therefore, it is more about maintaining existing "imagined communities", like family and old friends, and providing personal updates. The imagination here focuses more on "my image in the eyes of relatives and friends (S2) ," consolidating a sense of belonging based on strong ties.

Xiaohongshu is different. S1's statement is representative: "After I came abroad, I spend far more time on Xiaohongshu than on WeChat and Instagram... For me, Xiaohongshu, in a way, helps me feel more closely connected to China than even WeChat does. In the airport to Vienna, I was so sad and I posted my homesickness on Xiaohongshu, Almost immediately, many felllow Chinese international students responded in the comments to comfort me, which made me not feel so lonely". She emphasized the "felllow Chinese international students" and "instant response" of Xiaohongshu, the feeling of being able to have a direct conversation with people in China. This reveals a participatory and information-rich emotional connection pattern of hometown social media. S1 mentioned that many Chinese international students comforted him and made him feel less lonely. Although he did not explicitly use terms like "community" or "imagined community" to describe the experience, his account vividly illustrates how a sense of belonging and connection can spontaneously emerge in a specific digital space. This emotional support, offered by numerous individuals he had never met but who shared similar identities and experiences, highlights how shared cultural backgrounds, language, and emotional needs can foster an imagined sense of community among users. From the theoretical perspective of this study, Xiaohongshu, with its platform characteristics of visualization, lifestyle orientation and interest aggregation, indeed provides an important

digital space and practical opportunity for building such an "imagined community" based on common identities, such as "overseas Chinese students" and shared cultural experiences. On Xiaohongshu, a community full of real life vitality has emerged, formed around the lifestyle and consumption culture of contemporary Chinese young people. By Posting content on this platform, international students are not only sharing information but also actively participating in the construction and perception of a vivid cultural scene shared with their Chinese counterparts. This connection established through user content generation and interaction continuously reinforces their perception and sense of belonging to this specific "lifestyle community". This forms a broader sense of "cultural belonging", which contrasts sharply with the "intimate belonging" based on acquaintances that is mainly maintained through WeChat.

These two types of belonging experiences, which are born out of the characteristics of different platforms, can both be regarded as reflections of Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" in different aspects of the digital age. The former, the interest-based community formed on Xiaohongshu, can be understood as a "digital cultural imagination community" based on a common lifestyle and cultural consumption. Although its members are widely connected, they still need to be maintained through "imagination". The latter, such as WeChat Moments, uses digital media to continuously maintain and imagine the bonds between known individuals who are geographically dispersed but have concrete and deep emotional connections through digital media, or can be termed a "digital intimate imagined community" based on strong connections. The significance of this distinction lies not only in revealing the inherent complexity of the picture of individual belonging in the digital age, but

also prompts us to rethink the scope of application of the concept of "imagined communities", We can expand it from the grand level of the nation-state based on print media that Anderson initially focused mainly on to the communities of different scales, such as personalized intimate circles and interest-based life communities, and different natures, such as emotional maintenance based on strong connections and identity performance based on weak connections, that are born and shaped by digital platforms. In these different types of digital communities, the core and mechanism of "imagination" may also evolve accordingly. For instance, the "imagination" in a "digital intimate imagination community" focuses more on maintaining the continuity and simultaneity of known relationships, while the "imagination" in a "digital cultural imagination community" relies more on shared symbols, tastes, performative practices, and interactive rituals.

These participatory practices are not merely for recording feeling or sharing information. Creating vlogs or posting with pictures and text both require investment of effort and time. For student like S3 who view overseas study as a short-term stage, such investment is clearly relevant to maintaining current and future connections with their home countries. Just as S3, who is studying in the UK, explained her motivation and experience in running her Xiaohongshu account: "Running an account is not easy...the reasons why I stick to posting is I realize I would stay in the UK for a year and go back after graduation. The connections in China are still very important. And I did get to know many people on Xiaohongshu to play and travel with." This passage from S3 shows the multiple considerations behind its content creation: it not only reflects the desire to record fresh experiences and share them with a wider audience, but also contains genuine feelings about the hard work of creation. More

importantly, she has clearly linked the continuous operation of her account to the practical need of maintaining "domestic connections" after returning to China after graduation. This planning for her future life back in China and her emphasis on social connections with her home country are the intrinsic reasons why she persists in this practice even when content creation requires a lot of effort. Such intentional content creation suggests that Xiaohongshu is not merely a space for personal documentation but also serves as a medium for constructing and sustaining social belonging. This can be further understood through the concept of the "imagined communities." S3 regards the activities on Xiaohongshu as an important strategy to maintain her identity as an insider of home country and ensure a continuous connection with the "imagined communities" of her home country.

S3, like many other Chinese international students, also uses social platforms from the host country. However, the depth of connection and emotional investment on these platforms often falls short compared to those rooted in the home country. This contrast reflects how students navigate and prioritize their multiple senses of belonging across digital spaces. For some students, platforms like Instagram and Facebook serve more utilitarian functions. For example, they use them to get course information, complete academic tasks, or for superficial social interactions, such as brief exchanges with international classmates. There is generally less deep self-disclosure and emotional investment.

Language barriers and cultural gaps are certainly factors. However, platform characteristics and the community atmospheres they foster also play a role. For instance, Facebook's group function might be useful for obtaining information. But its complex privacy settings and diverse user base may not facilitate intimate emotional connections as easily as WeChat

Moments. S4 said, “I mainly use Facebook to check information, such as buying things or checking school activities. I don’t chat with people very well on it.” This contrasts with their experience of using WeChat Moments, which has been described by many students as “a more private and emotionally supportive space”. S4 believes: “When I post on Moments, I know who will see it. It feels like sharing with a small circle of people who truly understand me.”

Instagram’s strong visual impact and its tendency towards “perfect life” portrayals might also make some students feel pressured or alienated during their initial cultural adaptation. S1 explained, “Everyone on Instagram seems perfect. At the beginning, I didn’t dare to post anything myself. I felt that my life was too ordinary and not wonderful enough.” This can make it difficult for them to establish a deep sense of belonging on such platforms.

S7’s case is also thought-provoking. He was known as a social butterfly. However, after two years in Austria that he “didn’t really feel like deliberately trying to make new local friends anymore”. He explained, “I feel like there are many foreigners I can hang out and chat with, but the cultural backgrounds are too different, and they might not necessarily understand certain feelings”. Therefore, when he “really had something to discuss seriously, or felt down and wanted to confide, I would still instinctively open WeChat first and look for friends back in China”. S7’s example shows that even if individuals have excellent local social skills and build extensive social networks while trying to connect to the host country’s “imagined community,” host country platforms and relationships may still fall short. Due to differences in cultural backgrounds and communication contexts, foreign social media platforms often struggle to provide the same level of emotional comfort and identity resonance that one’s

native-language cultural environment offers, particularly through strong-tie platforms like WeChat. For deep-seated needs, home country social platforms like WeChat often continue to play an indispensable role. They serve as a unique emotional supportive platform among Chinese users and carry their core sense of belonging. This reveals how different media forms vary in facilitating connections of different depths to "imagined communities." It also highlights individuals' strategic choices about emotional investment when faced with multiple potential belongings.

These findings illustrate the complex emotional landscape that Chinese international students navigate through different digital platforms. The distinctions between strong-tie and weak-tie communities, emotional and functional media use, and native-language versus foreign-language environments all shape their strategic choices in emotional investment and identity negotiation. This underscores the need to reconceptualize "imagined communities" not as fixed, nationalistic entities, but as fluid, digitally mediated collectives shaped by personal needs, cultural contexts, and platform affordances.

3.2 Social Practices and Identity Performance

Digital media have fundamentally changed the lives of international students. This includes their daily routines, social interactions, ways of accessing information, and even their emotional experiences. These changes themselves have become a core element shaping their transnational experiences. The characteristics of different platforms play a key role in these transformations, forcing students to learn how to switch and adapt between multiple "imagined communities."

One of the most significant changes in the digital age is the complete transformation of the information environment. Compared to the limited and delayed information access of the pre-digital era, contemporary students can access vast amounts of information from both their home and host countries almost instantly. This makes it easier for them to maintain a dual life, which involves continuously managing and negotiating social networks and information flows from both their home and host countries. Students often need to use Chinese platforms like WeChat and Weibo to track domestic developments, connecting to the home country's "imagined communities". At the same time, they use WhatsApp, Facebook, or university email systems for local affairs and connect to the host country or academic community. Managing this dual life is itself a media practice. Its effectiveness depends on understanding and switching between the information flow characteristics of different platforms, such as the immediacy of WeChat groups versus the formality of emails. However, this abundance of information also brings new challenges. These include effectively filtering and discerning within complex information streams pushed by different platform algorithms. Students also face managing the potential cognitive load from simultaneously focusing on multiple communities.

Social media have accelerated and diversified the process of building social circles. For example, S1 actively used Facebook's group function to meet new friends, expand her local social network, and try to integrate into new "imagined communities". However, this convenience might also lead students to primarily engage with homogenous cultural communities, forming "information cocoons" (Sunstein, 2017; Cargnino & Neubaum, 2020). S8's experience is an example: upon arrival, she still mainly browsed Weibo and

Xiaohongshu for Chinese information, feeling that "foreign apps weren't very interesting, and I didn't know anyone on them".

Weibo's topic-based aggregation and Xiaohongshu's algorithm-based personalized recommendations can efficiently connect Chinese users with shared interests. However, they may also reinforce existing cultural preferences. This can lead Chinese international students to more deeply engage in their home country's "imagined community" and reduce opportunities to encounter different cultural circles. Consequently, this may limit the possibility of their sense of belonging expanding to other communities. This phenomenon reveals that although digital media offer tools for integration, the features of specific platforms might also encourage a deeper or more lasting "cocooning" within the home country's "imagined community." This could potentially slow down or change the nature of their interaction with the host country environment. This contrasts sharply with past eras when immersive experiences in the host culture were often unavoidable.

Social media act like Goffman's "stage" (Goffman, 1959), where students strategically perform multiple identities for different platforms and their respective audiences. They do this to meet the expectations of the various "imagined communities" they connect with. WeChat Moments, due to its relatively private nature among acquaintances, might be where they show a more lifestyle-oriented side that aligns with the expectations of family and friends. This serves the communal imagination shared with these close circles. Weibo, with its public nature, can become a space for expressing opinions or joining public discussions, connecting to a broader social communal imagination, though it also faces wider scrutiny. Xiaohongshu encourages a curated lifestyle performance, constructing a specific lifestyle communal

imagination. When handling sensitive topics, such as the Taiwan issue, some students demonstrate an ability for contextualized expression and mask management. For example, they might primarily display a “patriotic” image on WeChat Moments but remain silent or use vague language on Instagram, which is open to international friends. This blurring of public and private boundaries, and the need to manage self-presentation before “imagined audiences” shaped by different platform features, reflects a significant change in student life. This directly impacts how they interact with different forms of “imagined audiences” mediated by various platforms. It also demonstrates their coping strategies under the pressure of multiple belongings.

Social butterfly S7 made a particularly clear distinction in how he used different platforms: “I post positive content about China on WeChat Moments. Videos of my own piano performances or event activities, I post on Instagram. I would not post content related to China, especially political content, on Instagram for my foreign friends to see.”

In summary, this chapter analyzes Chinese international students’ media practices, showing how diverse platforms are used for multiple emotional connections during early adaptation. WeChat provides essential support with core “imaginary communities” (family/friends), while Xiaohongshu facilitates broader cultural community building and “insider” identity performance, with varied investment in host country platforms reflecting strategic emotional choices. Digital media has also fundamentally altered students’ daily lives, information access, social interactions, and identity presentations. These practices is necessary for navigating multiple “imagined communities” and their challenges. These findings establish an empirical

foundation for the subsequent chapter on the negotiation of national belonging and identity types.

Chapter 4: Negotiating National Belonging within Multiple "Imagined Communities"

This chapter will focus on how national belonging is materialized, reinforced, challenged, and negotiated through students' media practices. It will further analyze the resulting differences in media practices and identity characteristics between "Transient" and "Integrated" student types. The research will continue to apply Anderson's theory. Particular attention will be paid to how different social media platform characteristics shape students' perceptions of their nation and other "imagined communities." It will also examine how they position themselves and negotiate their belonging within these multiple, sometimes even conflicting, communal imaginations.

4.1 Constructing National Belonging in Digital Spaces

For Chinese international students living abroad, various digital practices materialize their connection with their home country's "imagined community." This, in turn, reinforces their national belonging. These practices are not abstract; they are realized through the characteristics of specific social media platforms. As a result, they shape unique and sometimes multifaceted communal imaginations.

Digital "simultaneity" rituals, actualized through platform characteristics, reinforce specific national narratives. By tracking domestic hot news, internet pop culture, and important festival events, like "cloud New Year greetings" during Spring Festival in real-time via social media, students can psychologically and emotionally re-anchor themselves to their home country's cultural context, even while abroad. This cross-regional simultaneous participation and shared experience not only recreates an Anderson's "ritual". With its high degree of

immediacy and interactivity, it powerfully strengthens their collective imagination and identity as “Chinese”. For example, on open platforms like Weibo, collective attention to and celebration of national events (such as an Olympic tennis victory) can quickly form a surging, shared sense of national pride. Students participate through platform-specific interactions like liking, forwarding, and commenting. In doing so, they imagine and experience a strong and united “national community.” This “national imagination,” shaped by platform characteristics like Weibo’s public square effect and rapid dissemination, is grand and highly emotionally mobilizing.

Beyond its performance function, Xiaohongshu can, in certain situations, become a key space for building consensus and taking collective action to meet challenges. It can form a kind of digital fortress and a defensive “imagined community.”

Around May 2025, a series of violent attacks targeting Chinese individuals occurred in Australia. These events sparked widespread panic and anger within the local Chinese community. After learning the news, I contacted all interviewees online to ask for their reactions. Almost all interviewees expressed extreme anger. S3 said frankly: “Seeing videos on Tiktok of Chinese people being beaten is really a bit scary. You know some teenagers in the UK are also very aggressive; I haven’t dared to go out alone at night recently.” This individualized fear and anger quickly spread through social media, turning into a collective sense of crisis. This prompted strong calls within the community to “huddle together for warmth”, seeking collective comfort and support. S5 stated: “It’s really lonely being out here on my own. If something happens, it feels much safer when you’ve got others from your own community to deal with things together.”

During the incidents of attacks on Chinese individuals in Sydney, Xiaohongshu became an important platform for local Chinese residents. They used it to share information, remind each other, discuss self-protection, and even organize collective defense measures like community patrols. This clearly shows how an "imagined community" responds when it perceives a common external threat. Through their commonly used digital platforms that have cultural affinity, they quickly activate their identity. This identity is then translated into actual community protection actions, strengthening the community's boundaries and cohesion in specific situations.

In this context, the social media platform Xiaohongshu quickly transformed from a platform mainly for sharing daily life into a digital hub for multiple crisis response functions. The choice of Xiaohongshu reflects how its specific affordances met the mobilization needs of this event. Xiaohongshu's high level of trust within the Chinese diaspora community, the central role of User-Generated Content (UGC), a shared cultural context, and rapid interaction mechanisms made it more suitable for this type of grassroots, emotionally driven, and ethnicity-specific mobilization than other platforms.

For example, it was preferred over more public platforms like Twitter, or WeChat, which is primarily used for acquaintance-based social networking. Although WeChat is used for maintaining close ties, its layered communication style might lack the "digital public square" effect that Xiaohongshu demonstrated in calls to action for public safety and community mutual aid during this crisis.

Community mobilization on Xiaohongshu regarding the Sydney attacks took various forms. First was the rapid sharing of safety information and warnings. Users actively posted the latest

updates on the attacks, alerts about high-risk areas, and official safety notices. One local student netizen provided daily real-time updates on locations where dangerous Australian youths gathered and the developing conflicts with Chinese individuals. S6 was quite emotional when discussing this with me: “I think it’s really tough for Chinese international students abroad; sometimes we are just isolated and helpless. Thankfully, we can still chat together online. I saw many ‘sisters’ (fellow female users) on Xiaohongshu posting warnings, reminding people which areas are unsafe, and some shared police emergency numbers and consulate contact details.”

Secondly, emotional support networks were built, and calls for unity were made. A large number of posts expressing sympathy, condemning violence, comforting one another, and calling for unity appeared on the platform. These greatly alleviated the loneliness and fear among community members. Local Chinese residents actively discussed various self-protection methods on Xiaohongshu and spontaneously organized initiatives like “travel buddies” and “safety mutual aid groups.” Many Chinese international students in Australia advocated in comment sections: “If anyone finishes class late at night, let’s walk together or pick each other up.” Interviewee S1 actively commented: “If local students need it, I will provide financial support.”

These actions on Xiaohongshu were not just practical measures for crisis response; they were also practices that reinforced community identification and constructed collective identity. When the “Chinese” identity became salient due to external threats, Xiaohongshu became a temporary “digital fortress.” Within this fortress, a defensive “imagined community” was rapidly forged and activated. This community was centered on shared vulnerability, an urgent

need for safety, and ethnic identity. It differed from cultural imaginations that were based on a distant homeland. Instead, it was a localized community based on a shared sense of crisis in their current location. This community connected in real-time through digital media, sharing emotions, negotiating strategies, and demonstrating strong cohesion and agency.

This process profoundly influenced and complicated the participants' sense of belonging to their country of residence (Australia). More importantly, it prompts them to re-examine their connection with the broader "Chinese" identity and China itself, this connection is no longer an abstract cultural identity, but a concrete emotional and social reference. A respondent (S8) in Sydney admitted, "Such incidents have greatly reduced my sense of belonging here. Instead, they have made me feel that we Chinese are more reliable."

This psychological transformation is not only a natural response of an individual's emotions, but also a concrete manifestation of the continuous construction, reactivation and dynamic adjustment of the "imagined communities" under the influence of external stimuli. In this case, the attacks targeting Chinese people became a powerful trigger. On the one hand, it disrupted the imagination of some participants about their belonging to Australia. On the other hand, it strengthened a sense of ethnic connection across borders. This transformation of identity occurs in the information environment of digital platforms: the narration of violent incidents, the expression of group anger, and the rapid spread of empathy jointly intensify the emotional tension of a sense of belonging.

4.2 Challenges to and Negotiation of National Belonging

In cross-cultural contexts, many of the Chinese international students I interviewed often encounter collisions of different cultural narratives and "national imagination". This complicates their perception of the national "imagined communities" and can lead to conflicts with other communal imaginations. The Taiwan issue, due to its high political sensitivity and differing interpretations within various discourse systems, became a prominent case in this study. It allowed for observation of how Chinese international students negotiate such collisions and display their identity stances and media strategies.

When faced with expressions in the host country environment about Taiwan's status that differ from mainland China's official stance, Chinese international students' reactions and coping strategies show significant diversity. The choice of these strategies is closely linked to the types of media platforms they routinely access and use, and the information environments these platforms shape. It also reflects their balancing act between multiple "imagined communities," such as the national community, the international academic community, and their local social community.

Some students exhibit active defense and identity reinforcement, prioritizing loyalty to their national "imagined community". For example, S6 felt "angry" upon hearing statements like "Taiwan is not part of China" and believed she could "absolutely never be friends with someone holding this view". Such strong reactions often involve actively forwarding articles on social media that support China's position, participating in debates on related topics, or criticizing "dissenters" within their close circles. This behavior pattern is typically linked to

individuals who heavily rely on official domestic media and influential nationalist self-media for information, while being dismissive or skeptical of other information sources. The platforms they use, such as specific WeChat public accounts or certain influential on Weibo, may reinforce this singular narrative. This makes the boundaries of their "imagined community" clear and inviolable, and they tend to reject other potentially conflicting communal imaginations. S6 stated she never reads news from European media, believing, "Much of it is deliberately smearing China and is very absurd. Xiaohongshu is actually enough; it has all kinds of news, and you can find out about major events both domestically and internationally."

Other students choose avoidance, silence, and pragmatism, attempting to find a compromise between different "imagined communities". Unlike S6, S5 preferred to "just smile; there's not much point defending it. Talking about this with friends is useless except for hurting feelings". They believe arguing about such sensitive political issues in a foreign cultural environment is futile. It might even harm interpersonal relationships or personal safety, for instance, by affecting their integration into local social circles. In their media practices, they might consciously avoid sensitive political information. Or, if exposed to it, they might choose not to participate or take a stance, especially on public, international social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. They tend to use social media more for non-politicized daily interactions and practical information acquisition. Their "imagined community" might focus more on cultural and lifestyle aspects rather than political ones, thereby reducing conflicts between different communal imaginations. S5 appeared slightly wary when discussing the Taiwan

issue during the interview, repeatedly asking me, “Are you sure our recording won’t get out? If it does, I’m done for, haha.”

S1 also shared an interesting experience: “Once, after having a bit too much to drink with European friends, I was asked about my attitude towards the Taiwan issue. I said I had no thoughts on it. He said he’d actually wanted to ask this question for a long time but felt awkward doing so. You see, they might intentionally keep a social distance from us because of our Chinese identity. But I’m an individual; why should I bear the burden of national politics? So, sometimes I do feel that being Chinese affects my local social life.”

The study also observed some students adopting more complex and reflective strategies. These include “confusion, reflection, and seeking dialogue,” as they try to understand and reconcile differences between various “imagined communities”. After encountering different narratives, these students, while possibly still holding their basic positions, might also develop a degree of reflection or confusion about the very existence of different viewpoints. They might try to understand the roots of these differences by privately communicating with people from different backgrounds. This sometimes occurs through more private social media channels like WhatsApp private chats. Alternatively, they might proactively search for and read more diverse information, perhaps by searching on YouTube or accessing international news websites, rather than simply resorting to confrontation or complete avoidance. This strategy is often associated with broader media exposure and a stronger willingness for cross-cultural communication. The “imagined communities” they perceive might be more inclusive and complex, and they attempt to internally integrate these seemingly conflicting imaginations. These different reactions are not accidental. They reveal that national belonging

in the digital age is not a static attribute. Instead, it is a continuous performative and negotiable process, which becomes especially prominent when the "imagined communities" is challenged. The example of the Taiwan issue acts like a critical incident. It reveals students' potentially different orientations towards national belonging and their responses under the pressure of multiple communal imaginations. Digital platforms, and the information environments they shape, become the stage and influencing factors for these negotiations.

In short, the core of this chapter lies in revealing how the sense of national belonging of Chinese international students is actively constructed in the digital space, sometimes facing severe challenges, and ultimately being actively negotiated under the tension of multiple "imaginary communities". It is a dynamic process of continuous performance and reconstruction under the interaction between the individual and the media environment. The diversity of this kind of belonging practice and the different orientations of individuals in the negotiation process provide a key observation perspective and empirical basis for the next chapter to deeply analyze the specific characteristics of "Transient" and "Integrated" international students and the differences in their media practices.

Chapter 5: "Transient" and "Integrated" Students: Positioning Strategies within Multiple Belongings

After observing in the previous chapter that Chinese international students present diverse patterns and positions when negotiating a sense of national belonging, this chapter aims to elaborate in depth on the typology of "Transient" and "Integrated" international students proposed thereby. I will analyze that these two types are not only different in the media usage habits, but more importantly, in the fundamental strategic differences in their connection with multiple "imagined communities" shaped by different media forms, emotional investment, and self-positioning within them. This chapter aims to reveal how these differences reflect their different positioning strategies and identity characteristics in the complex landscape of multiple affiliations.

5.1 "Transient" and "Integrated" Students

The typology of "Transient International Students" and "Integrated International Students," offers an explanatory framework to understand the previously discussed differences in how students negotiate belonging. These two types do not just reflect variations in media use habits. More profoundly, they embody fundamentally different strategies for connecting with and emotionally investing in "communities" imagined through different media forms. They also show how students position themselves within multiple belongings.

"Transient International Students" prioritize maintaining their home country's "imagined community". Their sense of belonging is relatively singular and focused. Their core orientation is to view studying abroad as a temporary phase in life. Consequently, their media

practices revolve around maintaining connections with their home country, China, as an "imagined community." Home country platforms like WeChat serve as the "cornerstone" of their information ecology and social life. Through these platforms (e.g., WeChat for strong tie maintenance, Weibo for tracking domestic hot topics, Xiaohongshu for sharing Chinese lifestyles), they actively maintain and strengthen an "imagined community" centered on China. When facing "colliding imaginaries," they are more inclined to actively defend the national stance and refute "dissenting views." Their sense of belonging is primarily anchored to this relatively singular community, mediated by specific Chinese platforms. Their connection to other potential "imagined communities," such as the host country community, is more superficial, and their sense of belonging to them is weaker.

"Integrated International Students," on the other hand, actively explore multiple "imagined communities". Their sense of belonging is more complex and multifaceted. They demonstrate greater openness in their study abroad motivations, future prospects, and identity perception. They also more proactively explore and participate in the host country's society and culture, exploring multiple belongings. Their media use is more balanced. Besides using Chinese platforms, they also more actively use international or local platforms like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Tinder. They try to understand and connect with the host country or broader transnational "imagined communities" through these platforms. When facing colliding imaginaries, they might not adopt the direct confrontational stance common among "Transient" students. Instead, they might display pragmatic avoidance, like S5, or show a greater inclination to listen to different viewpoints and engage in critical thinking. Their national belonging might become one layer among multiple belongings, or it might be

reinterpreted through interactions with other communities. Their "imagined community" landscape is more diverse and complex and can better accommodate tensions between different communal imaginations.

S4's active learning of German and his efforts to expand local networks, driven by adjustments in his career plans, demonstrate his shift from "Transient" towards "Integrated" characteristics. This clearly illustrates the dynamic nature of these orientations to belonging. It suggests that the exclusivity or permeability of the national "imagined community" varies for different individuals. This variation is influenced by their broader life plans and media practices, particularly the types of platforms they rely on. These platforms, in turn, shape their imagination of multiple community forms and their willingness to engage with them.

It is worth noting that even for individuals with strong social skills, like S7, the emotional solace and identity resonance from their home country's "imagined community" often run deeper. This is particularly true for connections maintained through strong-tie networks on platforms like WeChat, surpassing the depth of connections made in the host country. This highlights the enduring power of the primary national "imagined community" to provide deep security when mediated through specific media forms, such as strong-tie social platforms. This power persists even if individuals are simultaneously exploring and connecting with other "imagined communities." Anderson's "deep, horizontal comradeship" seems to be most profoundly felt among individuals who share a foundational cultural and linguistic imagination, even when this feeling is transmitted via digital media across vast distances.

5.2 Differences in Navigating Multiple Belongings

Core differences distinguish “Transient” from “Integrated” international students regarding “connection,” “changes,” and “national belonging,” especially in their perception and negotiation of multiple “imagined communities” shaped by various media forms. These variations are apparent across several key characteristics.

Regarding their primary connection mode and platform preference, the “Transient” orientation shows a digital life primarily anchored to the home country’s “imagined community”. There is a high reliance on Chinese platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, with a weaker connection to other communities. In contrast, the “Integrated” orientation involves seeking and establishing connections within multiple “imagined communities”. Besides Chinese platforms, these students more actively use international or local platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp.

In their Response to media-driven “changes in student life,” “Transient” students find that media reinforce existing paths towards returning home. They may experience “cocooning” due to specific platforms, such as those based on algorithm recommendations, which solidifies their reliance on a single community. “Integrated” students, however, exhibit diverse connections. For them, media foster broader participation and the diversification of potential life paths. They also tend to use different platforms to adjust their life rhythms and adapt to life in multiple communities.

Concerning “national belonging” through the materialization and complication of Anderson’s “Imagined Community,” the “Transient” orientation primarily uses digital media, especially

Chinese platforms with specific cultural attributes. This is to maintain and strengthen a singular, primary "imagined community" through shared rituals and narratives. The form of their imagined community is heavily shaped by these platform characteristics, and their sense of belonging is relatively concentrated. The "Integrated" orientation, conversely, uses digital media to navigate, co-construct, or bridge multiple, sometimes overlapping "imagined communities". This results in a more fluid or hybrid sense of national belonging. Their imagination of community is more diverse and layered, and their sense of belonging is also more complex.

In their "national belonging" response to challenged or colliding imaginations, such as the Taiwan issue, "Transient" students tend to actively defend home country narratives and reinforce the boundaries of their "imagined community". Their information sources may be relatively singular and influenced by specific platform information flows, making it difficult for them to accommodate conflicting communal imaginations. "Integrated" students, however, lean towards reflection, dialogue, or pragmatic avoidance. They navigate complexity between different "imagined communities," and their information sources may be more diverse, enabling them to better handle the tensions of belonging.

Describing these differences in this way links the empirical typological classification with this study's new core themes and its core theoretical framework. This framework is Anderson's theory, which emphasizes the relationship between media forms and imagination, as well as the complication of belonging in the digital age. This detailed comparison helps readers understand the variations in how "Transient" and "Integrated" student types handle media participation strategies, changes in life experiences, and national belonging as an "imagined

community" within the context of multiple communities. This makes the core arguments of the study easier to understand and accept.

This chapter reveals the significant differences between "Transient" and "Integrated" international students in their digital media practices and multiple affiliation negotiation strategies by distinguishing between them: the former are more inclined to adhere to a single "imagined communities" centered on the home country, while the latter demonstrate an open attitude of embracing diverse connections. However, this type classification is not an absolute boundary; rather, it is more like a dynamic spectrum. As the case of S7 suggests, even for individuals who seem highly "integrated", their deep-seated reliance and longing for their home country's culture and strong emotional bonds, especially the close relationships maintained by WeChat, remain an indispensable part of understanding their complete sense of belonging. This reflects the profound complexity of cross-border life journeys, where the desire for emotional security and the urge to explore the external world often coexist and dynamically intertwine. This typology and the inherent complexity and individual initiative it reveals further confirm the core viewpoint of this study: digital media does not lead to a single attribution outcome, but rather opens up a continuous negotiation space full of diverse possibilities, which provides a footing for the final conclusive reflections of this thesis.

Conclusion

This study focused on the social media practices of Chinese international students in Europe within the context of globalization. It explored the differentiated roles of various social media platforms as these students experience the reshaping of "connection," "changes in student life," and the "materialization or challenging of national belonging." By applying Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," the research emphasized the specific relationship between media forms and communal imagination. It also highlighted how digital media complicate the construction of belonging, leading to the coexistence or conflict of multiple belongings. Combined with the analysis of "Transient" and "Integrated" students, this study reveals a close connection. This connection exists between their study abroad motivations, identity positioning, their social media platform choices and usage strategies, and the specific perceptions of multiple "imagined communities" that are consequently shaped.

The research found that Chinese international students are not passively influenced by media. Instead, they actively use diverse digital "connections" to forge and maintain relationships with the "imagined communities" of their home country, host country, and even transnational groups. The nature (emotional, informational, social) and strength of these connections, along with the specific forms of the communities they "imagine," are profoundly shaped by the characteristics of the social media platforms they use. Examples include the closed nature of WeChat, the public square nature of Weibo, and the visual lifestyle sharing on Xiaohongshu. These multiple connections and multiple communal imaginations make their experiences of belonging more complex and fluid.

At the same time, the deep embeddedness of social media has fundamentally "changed" international students' lifestyles. This includes their information management, social interaction patterns, and identity performance strategies. This brings new opportunities and challenges, especially in managing and negotiating multiple belongings. Regarding "national belonging," digital spaces serve two roles. They are venues where belonging is "materialized" and reinforced through shared digital rituals and media consumption on specific platforms. They are also arenas where belonging is "challenged" and negotiated when conflicting narratives are encountered. Students' responses to these challenges are also related to their media practices and information environments and reflect their balancing act between multiple "imagined communities."

"Transient" students tend to use home-country social media platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu as their main spaces. They use them to maintain connections with the "homeland imagined community," seek emotional solace, and perform cultural boundary work. Their use of local social media is often instrumental and involves low emotional engagement. The "communities" they imagine through these platforms tend to focus more on domestic culture and life, making their sense of belonging relatively singular. In contrast, "Integrated" students more actively embrace mainstream local social media platforms. They see these as key pathways to understand, participate in, and integrate into the local socio-cultural context. In this process, they engage in more complex identity negotiation. The "imagined communities" they encounter and construct are also more diverse, and their sense of belonging shows greater multiplicity and is more open to negotiation.

This study confirms the importance of social media in the lives of transnational mobile groups. It further emphasizes that media use does not unilaterally influence cultural adaptation and identity. Instead, individuals' pre-set goals and identity strategies also profoundly shape their media practices. Applying Anderson's "imagined community" theory in the digital media context clearly shows how social media act as a core space for contemporary international students. In a mobile world, this is where they maintain, construct, and negotiate their sense of belonging and identity. This is particularly evident when analyzing how different social media platform characteristics shape communal imaginations and complicate belonging. These "imagined communities" are not passively inherited. They are actively curated and emotionally maintained, and their specific forms are deeply influenced by the media forms students choose and use. Students' choices of connection on digital platforms are themselves an investment in belonging to specific forms of community. This is also a reflection of their self-positioning within multiple belongings.

A key limitation of this study is its temporal scope. The interviewed Chinese international students were still in Europe and had not yet completed their studies. This offers a direction for future research: exploring potential shifts in their perspectives and media practices after they return to China. For instance, S2 expressed regret near her departure for not engaging more deeply with the local community ("Ah, if only I had visited more local attractions and made more friends like him (S7)"), hinting at evolving self-appraisals. Similarly, there's a common observation that former students often develop a nostalgic, "rose-tinted" view of their study abroad experiences (e.g., "A one-year UK master's student, a lifetime love for

Britain"). This suggests their subsequent re-imagination of both their home community and the other place warrants further investigation.

These post-return reflections are crucial for understanding the long-term impact on the multiplicity and complexity of "changes in student life" and "national belonging." This is because these experiences are likely to be reassessed and renarrated upon returning to the primary "imagined community." Furthermore, their mediated retelling of these experiences will also be a topic worthy of attention.

Bibliography

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* Verso.

Anthias, F. (2002). *Where do I belong? Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality*. Ethnicities, 2(4), 491-514.

boyd, d. (2010). *Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications.* In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites (pp. 39-58). New York: Routledge.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Cargnino, M., & Neubaum, G. (2021). *Are we deliberately captivated in homogeneous cocoons? An investigation on political tie building on Facebook.* Mass Communication and Society, 24(2), 187-209.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2014). *The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites.* In The Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies (pp. 151-164). MIT Press.

Forbush, E., & Foucault-Welles, B. (2016). *Social media use and adaptation among Chinese students beginning to study in the United States.* International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 50, 1-12.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday Anchor Books.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). *The strength of weak ties.* American Journal of Sociology, 78(6), 1360-1380.

Hofhuis, J., van Egmond, M. C., Lutz, F. E., von Reventlow, K., & Rohmann, A. (2023). *The effect of social network sites on international students' acculturation, adaptation, and wellbeing.* Frontiers in Communication, 8, 1186527.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Kashima, E. S., & Loh, E. (2006). *International students' acculturation: Effects of international, conational, and local ties and need for closure.* International journal of intercultural relations, 30(4), 471-485.

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural5 adaptation*. Sage.

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and polymedia*. Routledge.

Papacharissi,7 Z. (Ed.). (2010). *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites*. Routledge.

Robertson, S. (2013). *Transnational student-migrants and the state: The education-migration nexus.* Springer.

Sayad, A. (2004). *The suffering of the immigrant*. Polity Press. (Original French 1999)

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media.* Princeton University Press.

Urry, J. (2002). Mobility and proximity. Sociology, 36(2), 255-274.

Wellman, B. (2001). *Physical place and cyberplace: The rise of networked individualism.* International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 25(2), 227-252.9.

Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). *Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships.* Computers in Human Behavior,10 24(5), 1816-1836.