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PANEL: ONLINE TRUST IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL MIGRATION: MOBILITY, SOCIALITY, AND THE PRODUCTION OF CHINESE DIASPORIC SUBJECTIVITY IN AUSTRALIA

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Summary

Digital media has now well-integrated into the journey of migration. New communication and media technologies have shaped migrants' sense of self and belonging, reconfigured their experience of geo-mobility, and enabled a new mode of sociality and cultural imaginary. Chinese migrants in Australia embody these qualities not only Chinese is one of the largest ethnic communities in Australia, but the recent waves of immigration from China coincided with the rise of the Chinese-language digital platforms and China-based technological enterprises. Unlike their predecessors who had limited choice of Chinese language content, the media consumption and mode of communication of today's Chinese migrants have become more abundant, flexible, and personalised.

In light of the conference theme, *Trust in the system*, this panel brings together three papers that explore the (trans)formation of Chinese diasporic subjectivity through the intellectual lens of online dis/trust. As Giddens (2010) argues, trust is a shared social reality. Such a sense of collectively is being 'stretched' across national borders and cultural boundaries. While recent interests in online trust focus on the institutional (Flew, 2019) and interpersonal trust (Papacharissi, 2012) within a given geo-cultural context,

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i.e. the (lack of) western liberal democracy, fewer explore the dis/trust and the associated concepts of authenticity and credibility against a transnational and cross-border environment. By transnationality, we refer to the increased level of mobility of the material goods, financial capitals and social networks of contemporary migrants. In other words, they live a life that is constantly 'transiting' between national, social and cultural borders rather than having to choose a static sense of belonging.

The three papers are then, organised to explore the transnational characters of Chinese migrants' lives in Australia, from financial and economic survival to dating and socialisation, and the re-exploration of selfhood and belonging at later life. The papers draw on different research methods range from ethnographic interviews and participant observation, to the walkthrough method and interface studies, and to the researcher embedded approach, to form critical inquiries about the production of trust in a digital era from the perspective of transnational migrations.

The panel's discussions begin with the study of the *daigou* practice (personal shopper) between Australia and China, which involve two perspectives. On the one hand, the rise of *daigou* relates to the lack of trust in mainstream social institutions in China. Chinese overseas students have taken up the responsibilities to provide material supplies such as baby formulas, vitamin supplements and other material goods back to China because Australian products are deemed to be more trustworthy, authentic and hence, 'safer'. The trust between the purchaser and her/his customers requires ongoing engagements and configurations via WeChat, the primary platform that host and facilitates the transaction of goods and services of *daigou* between China and Australia.

As the formation of a transnational *daigou* network relies on the interpersonal trusts between the purchaser and buyers who reside at different places at the time of transactions, the interpersonal trusts between individuals also guide Chinese migrants' experience with dating and intimate relations building. The second paper examines the use of popular dating apps, Tinder, and the Chinese dating app, Tantan, in Australia. Although the two platforms share similar digital infrastructures, the cultural implications embodied within these two apps and the mode of use differ significantly. While the sense of authenticity and trust on Tinder resembles a consumeristic logic of free choice, the sense of authenticity on Tantan is based on the Chinese notion of '*guanxi*' (social networks), which emphasis on the building and accumulation of social capitals and interpersonal harmony. Moreover, complexities of this issue have been raised in the context of cross-cultural use. Australia-based Chinese dating app users, according to the second paper, are more likely to perceive dis/trust of Tinder and Tantan based on their perceptions of 'the local', instead of authenticity mechanisms constructed by these two apps.

Trust is not only a principal concern to the younger digital media users but online trust also facilitates elderly Chinese migrants (ECMs) to reflect and revisit their social networks across China and Australia. Going against the popular perception that older migrants are less capable with new technologies due to lack of English and digital

literacies, the third paper shows that digital media platforms are well integrated into ECMs's retirement lives in Australia. However, instead of actively looking for new connections ECMs tend to focus on the online management of their pre-existing social networks, which were established in China and Australia. ECMs are particularly fascinated by the privacy setting on instant messenger apps not because they concern about their personal data being exploited by large corporations, but they like to better manipulate the distribution of their online content to different sets of social networks within and beyond Australia.

In examining the different stages of life and the plurality of Chinese migrants in Australia, the three papers in this panel collectively, has the potential to contribute to the broader conversation in online trusts in a global, polymedia era.

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Papacharissi, Z. (2012). Without You, I'm Nothing: Performances of the Self on Twitter. *Page Header Logo International Journal of Communication*, 6, 1989-2006.

PAPER 1: PRACTISING *DAIGOU* ON SOCIAL MEDIA: BUILDING TRUST AND NEGOTIATING PRIVACY IN TRANSNATIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Introduction

In this paper, I explore the strategies involved in Chinese international students' use of social media for *daigou*. *Daigou*, literally translated as purchasing on behalf of, refers to both a form of transnational trading activity that is characterized by selling and shipping foreign-made commodities directly to consumers in China and the people or enterprises that carry out these activities. Engaging in this transnational micro-entrepreneurship requires Chinese international students to both mobilize their established networks and build new networks on social media. Consequently, commitments to this activity has complicated their online relationships which require new ways of managing them. In particular, I focus on the significant role of trust throughout the *daigou* business, from motivating my participants to take on this entrepreneurial activity to ensuring the success of the business.

While extant scholarship on migrants' transnational entrepreneurship has revealed that recent developments of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have fostered intense cross-border business exchanges that earlier transnational entrepreneurs could not sustain or engage in (Chen & Wellman, 2009; Portes et al., 2002), less attention is given to the ways in which the use of these technologies for work purposes have become part of migrants' everyday lives. The emergence and popularisation of social media have greatly supported the co-presence of multiple types of online relationships in the same social space (Marwick & boyd, 2011), resulting in an increasingly blurred boundary between personal and professional lives. In this context, this paper seeks to understand how Chinese international students negotiate the diversity of their online networks.

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader doctoral study that examines Chinese international students' everyday social media practices in Australia. Research data was collected during a twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork in which I conducted observation of Chinese international students' navigation of physical and digital spaces in situ, in Melbourne, Australia, and immersive observation of their online posts and interactions (on multiple platforms including WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) which span a range of local and transnational locations. In so doing, I "treat internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 5) to reject a dichotomous or mutually exclusive relationship between the so-called "online"

and “offline” environments. To complement these observations, I also carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 28 Chinese international students in order to understand how and why they use social media in particular manners from their own perspectives. Through my prolonged immersion in the various social spaces where Chinese international students frequent, I managed to gain in-depth knowledge of their everyday digital experiences and practices.

Findings

This paper generates three key findings that revolve around the concepts of trust and privacy.

Firstly, a central factor that has given rise to *daigou* business is Chinese customers' lack of trust in the products available in China. Despite the increasing popularity of e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, which have provided a wide range of overseas commodities from a variety of countries, many consumers in China tend to not trust these platforms because they believe there are counterfeits on these platforms. Indeed, media coverage of China's rising e-commerce market over the past decade has critically responded to this phenomenon by pointing out the vast number of counterfeits found in online transactions. As a result, many consumers in China still prefer *daigou* who actually live overseas, such as Chinese international students with convenient access to authentic products.

Secondly, consumers' trust in overseas *daigou* is not a given, but something that is being constantly produced and negotiated by both Chinese international students and their customers. Since authenticity of the products is the major concern for Chinese consumers, *daigou* need to prove their identity as REAL students who are studying overseas. This is because being international students differentiate them from the e-store owners on Taobao whose identities are barely known, and sometimes suspicious. However, the fact that the student-*daigou* have mostly never met their customers in person has made it a difficult task. As such, it requires my participants' active and strategic online identity performances to reveal their identity as international students in Australia to their customers, which remains a prominent task throughout their practices of *daigou* on social media.

A common strategy undertaken by the student-*daigou* is to publicise personal lives to those who are interested in purchasing commodities from them. These information covers a wide range, including different aspects of their everyday social lives and campus life in Australia. It is the “hereness” embedded in the personal information disclosed that matters in fostering trust of the clients. Furthermore, instead of sharing personal lives in an explicitly instrumental manner, Chinese student-*daigou* need to do it intricately so that the revelation of their identities becomes a natural process. In other words, the intentional act of constantly publicising personal lives in a conspicuously unintentional manner reinforces my research participants' identity as real students, thus

enhancing their credibility. While it would be unfounded to treat these student-*daigou* as celebrities, their practices of privacy boundary-moving resemble those of Internet “microcelebrities” who often intentionally disclose many aspects of their everyday lives to create “the illusion of ‘backstage’, giving the impression of uncensored glimpses into the lives of the very famous” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 140). Similar to the celebrities, Chinese student-*daigou* actively foster a sense of “perceived interconnectedness” (Abidin, 2015) between them and their customers. In this sense, instead of building real intimate relationships, they strive to create the mirage of being honest and candid to their clients, just like their real friends on social media.

Finally, while the strategy of disclosing personal information to customers is a common strategy undertaken by Chinese international students, they do not post every bit and piece of their lives on social media. In this sense, practices of *daigou* require not only sharing personal lives, but also careful management of the materials that they choose to make visible to this specific group of people who are barely “friends” to them. For this reason, the student-*daigou* categorise, very often informally and unconsciously, the publicised materials into different types. Only a certain type of information is appropriate to share with their customers. In this sense, despite the importance of disclosing personal information, Chinese international students in this study have strived to maintain a sense of privacy. This is achieved through a variety of online strategies including separate accounts, categorisation of contacts into groups, etc.

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PAPER 2: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS ON AUTHENTICITY FRAMING OF DATING APPS TINDER AND TANTAN

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As Hardey (2004) argues all stages involved in online dating requires successful communication that builds on trust among users. Hence, ensuring online suitor's authenticity is a central theme in online dating websites (Hardey, 2004). While mobile dating applications (apps) have distinct technological features compared to dating websites, scholars have pointed out that authenticity is still a major concern to dating app users (Chan, 2017; Duguay, 2017), even though interpersonal trust may not be essential for those who use dating apps for casual sex (Chan, 2017), and indeed, dating app companies have put much effort in establishing authenticity within mobile dating apps. Previous studies have shown that importing users' Facebook information into dating app profiles is a commonly used strategy to ensure users are 'real people', such as Tinder (Duguay, 2017), and Bumble (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). However, Chinese dating app companies have to develop other ways to establish authenticity within their products, as Facebook is blocked in China, and there is no counterpart of such 'anchor' (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017) could be employed by these companies in the country. In addition to such specific technological and political constraints, Chinese culture also has its own characteristics with respect to the understanding of trust. For example, *guanxi* (relationships) is a core concept of Chinese networking culture, which is a significant survival strategy in China's social, political and organizational context (Huang, 2010). In the context of digital mediated communication, *guanxi* continues to be important (McDonald, 2018), and this can be translated into Chinese internet culture, for instance, Chinese WeChat users tend to only trust their close friends' comments on this app (Lien & Cao, 2014), which indicates that the app rating mechanism in Apple App Store may be less likely to affect Chinese users compared with their western peers. As such, although Chinese dating apps may share similar digital architectures with their western counterparts, strategies for framing their authenticity can be significantly different.

Methodology

This paper contrasts Tantan and Tinder as a case study to investigate the authenticity establishment within mobile dating apps in a cross-cultural fashion. Due to Tinder's absence in China, there was the opportunity for creating Tantan, a Chinese dating app that mimics Tinder, and although Tantan is often referred to as a Chinese Tinder clone in the west,¹ Tantan is the first and currently most popular Tinder-like dating app in China with 20 million monthly active users by the end of 2017.² Similar to Tinder, Tantan also claims itself as an authentic social platform with 'real' users. However, what is different from Tinder is that Tantan has developed different authentication strategies for the Chinese situation mentioned above. This paper draws data collected from the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016) and 23 interviews with Australia-

¹ See <https://www.larrysalibra.com/how-chinese-tinder-clone-screws-you/>

² See <https://m.pedaily.cn/news/427785>

based Chinese dating app users to investigate Tinder and Tantan's mechanisms of framing authenticity. Inspired by the hybrid theoretical framework built by Duguay (2017), this paper draws on Chinese cultural understandings of interpersonal trust to illustrate how authenticity is constructed among dating app users, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 2007; Latour, 1992, 2005) to disclose cultural meanings attached to non-human mediator (e.g. app features, algorithms) that contribute to framing dating apps' authenticity. Multiple walkthroughs have been conducted through critically engaging with their promotional materials, technological affordances and platform governance. In addition to Duguay's (2017) framework, I also draw interview data derived from my doctoral project that investigates how Australia-based Chinese users engage with Tinder and Tantan. This paper combines my analysis of these two platforms and my participants' concerns about Tinder and/or Tantan's authenticity framing while they were using them in Australia, to comprehensively discuss the issue of authenticity on dating apps in this particular context of the Australian Chinese diaspora.

Findings

The preliminary analysis reveals how the issues of trust play out among Australian Chinese diasporic dating users : 1) despite that the specific Chinese ways of authenticity framing do have effects in helping users build authentic identities within the app, the superficiality caused by the core feature of both apps – 'swipe logic' (David & Cambre, 2016) – paradoxically undermines trust between users; 2) socio-cultural contexts that Tinder and Tantan being embedded in shape their authenticity claim strategies respectively, and play a significant role in how authenticity within these apps might be perceived by users; 3) my participants' perceptions about western/Australian culture shape their perceptions of Tinder and Tantan cultures, and therefore shape how they perceive users' authenticity within these two apps. Bringing together perspectives from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and cultural studies, this paper provides a lens to examine how issues of trust play out in the Chinese cultural context, and thus contributes to the de-westernisation of current debates about trust by offering an empirical case from a non-western context. Practically, this paper also provides insights for dating app companies on how they might improve in framing authenticity within dating apps, and especially for those who are willing to expand their marketing transnationally.

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PAPER 3: BUILDING TRUST IN A TRANSNATIONAL AGING CONTEXT: OLDER CHINESE MIGRANT'S WECHAT USE IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

As Cecilie Givskov (2017) writes, the contemporary (western, at least) world is co-constituted by the dual processes of aging and digitisation. We shall add that transnational migration is a third process that has diversified the mode and experience of aging in a digital era. At the centre of this experience lays the issue of interpersonal trust in communication, which guides one's online practices, their sense of self and belonging.

While there is no shortage of interests and studies on either migrant new media use and digital media use amongst older generations, the elderly migrant group is located in-between at a grey area that is often overlooked. Take the elderly Chinese migrants (ECMs) group, for example; their digital experience falls into either the 'migrant internet' or the 'new media use in later life' categories. This study, however, treats the ECMs as a socially and culturally independent group, whose desire, wishes and mode of digital engagements and practices are transnational and cross-cultural.

Trust and interpersonal network connection

The issue of trust in communication has re-emerged in recent years as a result of what Flew (2019) calls the 'crisis of institutional trust' in the era of digital media, which focuses on the relationship between online content and digital media users' practices and perception of the world (O'Neill, 2017). Since trust is fundamental to the formation of human society as it relates to the concepts of credibility and authenticity of information and communication (Duguay, 2017), the constructions of trust rely on the constant exchange of symbolic practices and representations, such as profile radiation (Papacharissi, 2012) and timeline posting (Zhang and Wang, 2019), between users. These collective practices reinforce Giddens's (2010) argument that trust is a 'shared and sharable reality'.

However, the current literature mainly focuses on the building and negotiation of a 'week-tie' trust network, that is the new personal relation, and network interactions between users generally began in the virtual space. For many ECMs, their social networks in Australia, however, generally started from 'offline', such as the senior

association, neighbourhood, and community interest group, they are part of. WeChat, the popular Chinese instant messenger application (app) on the smartphone, is generally used to reinforce and sustain the newly developed networks rather than being the 'beginning' of a new set of relationships. This is mainly because 1. many WeChat users do not display their real names and 2. personal WeChat accounts are not easily searchable comparing to the account searchability on other social networks sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Sina Weibo. Interpersonal trust on WeChat thus, demonstrates how individual users navigate, imagine and manager their relations with the different sets of social networks in life, which is reproduced through their journey of transnational migration.

Dis/trust as the underlying principle of digitisation

This paper explores ECMs' WeChat use in Australia. WeChat is not only one of the most popular social media services in the Chinese speaking communities but the fact that WeChat registration only requires a mobile phone number rather than an online accounts (email) enables the platform to penetrate the older, non-digital native generations in China since its initial launch in 2011. According to Tencent's official report (2018), there are as many as 61million WeChat users in China age between 55-70 by September 2018. Many of whom migrated to Australia actively kept their WeChat with them. The popularity of WeChat among the elderly Chinese lead us to the research question of this study:

How ECMs use WeChat to navigate and construct the interpersonal trust with their social networks across Australia and home place?

We use the term 'home place' to recognise the diversity and plurality of Chineseness within and beyond the mainland PRC region (Leong, 2016). This study uses a combined participant observation and focus groups (eight on-site focus group interviews with 32 ECMs). The participant observations are the critical self-reflection made by the two authors, who had both worked as volunteers at different capacities and job functions, across the senior Chinese associations in Australia (Brisbane and Melbourne) between 2014 and 2018. In approaching our data we draw on Givskov and Deuze's (2018) advice to

1. adopt a cultural approach to understand the (trans)formation of a migrant self who is at the later stage of her/his life;
2. link the experience of mediatisation with the specific historical and biographical experience of the users;
3. explore the various practices and mode of engagement with the media to explore their perception, desire, and imagination with the particular media form.

Our preliminary findings suggest that the concept of dis/trust underlines the various practices and decision-making relating to WeChat. WeChat's Moments (timeline) privacy setting, for example, affords users to extend greater discretions over their different types of networks. Interestingly, many ECMs complained that they were often 'forced' to add someone they just met (face-to-face) as they do not want to seem as 'rude', they rely on Moment's privacy setting to prevent their shared content to be visible to the person. Such a selective practice of friend-list management illustrate ECMs's desire and ability to manage the different sets of social relations as the result of their transnational migration journey. Interestingly, such a pressure to connect with 'stranger' is greater in Australia according to some of our research participants as they concern of offending others in a new social environment will be troublesome for their lives in Australia. Hence, while WeChat might have established the 'technical, communicative connections' it also allows the newly established connection to be 'disconnected' on an interpersonal level.

Likewise, in assessing the credibility and authenticity of online news and information, ECMs tend to believe those content shared by their close personal networks, which often include connections from home country. It seems ECMs's sense of dis/trust of news and information is not necessarily determined by their trust of the institutions (e.g. news media) but the interpersonal trust that is reinforced through WeChat.

This study has the potential to contribute to the scholarly conversations about transnational migration in a social media era. It is found that social media has forged a culturally hybrid sense of self and belonging amongst the ECMs by enabling them to negotiate and manage their co-existing experience of aging and migration.

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