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Transforming habitus and recalibrating capital: University students' experiences in online learning and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought various challenges to the education domain globally. This study examines how a group of non-local university students studying at EMI universities in Hong Kong adjusted to the dominant online mode of learning and communication based on their lived experiences in learning and intercultural social networking during the pandemic. Employing the theory of digital literacies and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, we show how students expanded, redeveloped and transferred existing awareness, knowledge, competences and practices to engage in a range of digitally mediated academic and social activities in this condition. We conclude by discussing how the findings may inform refinement or readjustment of digitalized/zing international higher education.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges to educational activities and institutions around the globe. One major shift is the tremendous digitalization/virtualization of teaching and learning activities which have significantly reshaped the learning experiences and communicative practices of students in various contexts including Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2021). While substantial research has shown digital technologies and online networks can bring various benefits to education, the abrupt, largely passive switch to the online (or at least blended) mode of education due to the pandemic has resulted in or foregrounded many issues such as unequal access to the internet or digital resources and teachers’ and learners’ lack of knowledge and skills about how to operate online educational platforms/tools effectively (e.g. Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Chik & Benson, 2020; Obadire et al., 2020). In particular, due to all kinds of travel restrictions during the pandemic, international higher education also has had to seek alternative forms than the traditional ones relying on the physical mobility of students and academics. Therefore, there is an urgent need of research on students’ lived experiences in these challenging conditions to inform future education policies and practices.

The current study examines how twenty-four mainland Chinese students studying at multilingual and multicultural universities in Hong Kong agentively coped with these learning and communicative challenges as cross-border students or new situations through various (changing) social and communicative practices in the COVID-induced university lockdown in 2020–2021. It is based on semi-structured individual interviews which prompted the students to share their ideas and experiences related to learning, social networking and intercultural communication during the period of online learning. It draws on the theories of digital literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Jones & Hafner, 2012) and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986, 1993, 2002) concepts of habitus and capital in illustrating how this group of students adjust to the ‘new normal’ modes of learning and communication by transferring, expanding or (re)developing a range of awareness, knowledge, competences and dispositions with strategic use of various digital technologies or media to facilitate learning and social activities in different settings in this period. We argue that the findings show the students transformed their learner and social habitus by shifting their original learning and communication styles and strategies and developing more awareness and skills linked to the situated affordances of the digital media to cope with various challenges in this period. We also demonstrate how the students mobilize, adapt and recalibrate their existing social and cultural capital in relation to the conditions of the new/changing activities they need to frequently engage with in the same period. We explain these processes of transformation and recalibration by discussing how the
students (re)develop and/or (re)deploy a variety of digital literacy practices to facilitate learning and social networking under the impact of COVID-19. We conclude with some suggestions on the delivery of international higher education that relies heavily on the digital space.

2. Literature review

2.1. Applying digital technologies in international higher education

In recent years, international education has tended to incorporate or experiment with more digital methods in teaching and learning (e.g., Gemmel et al., 2015; McCorkle et al., 2016; Dorner, 2018; Lee and Cai, 2019). Many researchers have acknowledged that digital or online approaches can make it more convenient, efficient and economical (therefore arguably more equitable) to bring together students, teachers and (other) sources of knowledge, skills or expertise from different geographical, national or cultural contexts compared to the traditional type of international education which relies on physical mobility (e.g., Dorner, 2018; Gemmel et al., 2015; Lee and Cai 2019; McCorkle et al., 2016; Obadire et al., 2020). McCorkle et al. (2016) demonstrated how a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) can teach a culturally diverse group of students about World Englishes with rich instructor-provided content (e.g., video lectures by different guest lecturers) and equally adequate spaces for student-led activities such as discussion forms. Dorner (2018) researched how students participating in online collaborative seminars involving universities from Europe and the U.S. conceptualized and experienced international learning through these events. The students reported that the digitally realized collaborative learning approach enabled them to compare and integrate knowledge and skills across different institutions, disciplines and cultures as a collegial learning community. Similarly, Gemmell et al. (2015) found an online Master of Public Health program at a British university effectively facilitated exchanges of cultural experiences and perspectives between students from different countries through collaborative problem-solving learning activities with such digital tools as discussion boards and wikis. These exchanges, as the researchers argued, enabled the students to examine their own culturally shaped attitudes towards and understanding of public health issues. Lee and Cai (2019) found an online international course on addiction issues in a Canadian university drove students to become more active learners who needed to integrate various sources of information including ‘expert knowledge, ongoing peer discussion, and assignments’ to complete the course (p. 379). However, they also noted that the asynchronous classroom tended to delay very important interactions/discussions among the students and teachers despite its strength in accommodating the practical needs of students in different parts of the world. In addition, some have argued that most (particularly asynchronous) online teaching and learning platforms tend to put teachers and students at more equal footings compared to physical classroom settings and thus encourage more active participation from students and create a more democratic learning environment (e.g., Gemmell et al., 2015; Lee & Cai, 2019), while some others have observed emerging issues around authority to speak and produce credible knowledge in this mode of teaching and learning (e.g., Hewling, 2005). All the digital teaching and learning approaches or activities discussed above have helped many HEIs to implement/practice internationalization at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015) which doesn’t require students and staff to travel long distances to achieve international education.

However, social media, which can connect classroom learning and a wide range of everyday life experiences of students, seem to have been a largely untapped powerful tool and resource for educators all over the world (Chik & Benson, 2020). As Chik and Benson (2020) argue, this seems to result from a rigid ideology that treats informal/non-academic digital media as detrimental or destructive for learners while ignoring their huge potential in learner engagement and knowledge construction. Observing a linguistics-course-based Facebook group for students in an EMI Hong Kong university, Chau and Lee (2017) showed the students co-constructed the digital group as a social network-educational site where they combined the discussion of linguistic and cultural knowledge, networking with classmates and display of personal identities with English and non-English linguistic resources and different functions of Facebook. Sultana and Dovchin (2021) found their English-speaking Mongolian and Bengali students developed and practiced their linguistic and critical literacy skills when producing digital vernacular texts on various social media platforms, such as instant messaging and synchronous chat, blogs, and wikis, and online gaming. They argued that the benefits of diverse digital social activities (e.g., video gaming, social networking) should be acknowledged and utilized for critical, culturally sensitive teaching and learning.

2.2. Abruptly intensified digitalization of international education during the COVID-19 pandemic

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 has reshaped the landscape of international higher education across the world due to various factors such as restricted (physical) transnational mobility, uneven access to digital technologies and a lack of digital literacy skills among many students and teachers (e.g., Chan et al., 2021; Chik & Benson, 2020). The most significant change that the pandemic has brought to educational institutions all over the world is a sudden, forced shift to online or at least hybrid mode of teaching and learning, which has abruptly intensified the digitalization of education at all levels. For international/migrant students, this shift has arguably mitigated the loss of culturally immersive, place-based study-abroad experiences by providing convenient digital access to institutions, faculty and fellow students and various academic and social resources and activities (Chan et al., 2021; Obadire et al., 2020). Chan et al. (2021) claim that this shift has ‘provided students with added convenience, flexibility, and a safety net to pursue tertiary education at a distance’ (p. 4). However, while the digital education approach still manages to deliver international education to a certain extent, it has often significantly undermined the effectiveness of teaching and learning. For example, based in a Canadian university, Tavares (2021) compared the learner engagement of a group of international students in a humanities course he taught before and after the teaching mode was switched from in-person to online. He found the online teaching platform reduced individuals’ fully embodied behaviors and interactions to very limited texts and/or visuals on the screen (especially when most students preferred to keep the camera off), thus ‘dehumanizing’ the class by breaking a sense of learner community established in the face-to-face classes. He added that the digital mechanism of communication seemed to make the students more aware of their ‘non-native-speaker-of-English’ identity and less willing to speak as their linguistic mistakes tended to be more noticeable and they could easily resort to texting in the online classroom. Focusing on the South African context, Obadire et al. (2020) extensively examined the positive and negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education in that country. They argued that the online or distance education approach adopted by many HEIs enacted virtual international mobility for international students in a more inclusive and equitable manner than those requiring physical transnational mobility. Nonetheless, this approach has also further marginalized students (especially those in some African countries) who have limited access to digital technologies and the internet.
A survey of HEIs in thirty-eight European countries (Rumbley, 2020) showed a significant adverse impact of the pandemic on their staff and student mobility but also substantial evidence of multi-faceted communications between institutions, faculty members and students especially in the online mode. The survey report also pointed out the institutions’ lack of social media use in engaging local and larger communities about the educational crisis resulting from the pandemic. Chik and Benson (2020) observed that the predominantly English digital communication from Australian governments and educational institutions during the pandemic has reinforced a monolingual regime that sidelines international students’ multilingual repertoires and funds of knowledge. In the Chinese context, Li et al. (2020) illustrated how a group of South and Southeast Asian students studying at Chinese universities during the pandemic drew on their (developing) multilingual repertoires for digital communication for learning, socialization on and off campus and in transnational public health communication. They argued that the students’ increasing use of Chinese and other Asian languages compared to English for these activities seems to show the rise of a ‘Chinese-mediated’ multilingualism ‘embedded in the shifting paradigm of the China-oriented new economy addressing the mutual accountability in South-South cooperation’ (Li et al., 2020, p. 537). Studying over two hundred Chinese university students in Belgium, Cao and Meng (2020) found that students engaging in little face-to-face intercultural contact with other students can still improve their intercultural knowledge and competence through online intercultural contact. In the Hong Kong context, Mok et al. (2021) found many university students generally dissatisfied with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to multiple reasons such as poor learning atmosphere, technological requirement and lack of digital literacy skills while Ou et al. (2022) revealed that some students were able to construct translocal identity within the extended social networking, learning and communication in the physically and virtually interwoven spaces.

3. Research gap and questions

While the body of research on the impact of COVID-19 on international higher education continues to expand, most studies have focused on formal online or blended teaching and learning activities, showing a lack of attention to more wide-ranging and grounded experiences of international students. Such experiences are key to international education a key part of which is intercultural learning which ‘takes place through direct and first-hand experiencing and as individuals live through everyday events, as opposed to planned, structured and instructed learning’ (Zhu & Gao, 2021, p. 459). It is through these diverse and multi-faceted experiences that students can develop intercultural competence, that is, ‘the capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behaviour to cultural difference and commonalities’ (Hammer, 2013, p. 26). Online context provides a space different from physical encounters for multilingual users to gain exposure to different interactional norms, and linguistic and semiotic as well as cultural resources (Ou et al., 2022). Research suggests that multilingual leaners draw on their linguistic and cultural repertoire for meaning making and knowledge construction (Ou et al., 2020; Pennycook, 2017). Therefore, it would be meaningful to investigate how multilingual users navigate intercultural communication in the virtual world and explore capital recalibration across the boundary between communication taking place in physical and virtual contexts. This would contribute to an expanded understanding of intercultural communication. As such, the present study researches the grounded experiences of a group of non-local students studying at Hong Kong universities with a focus on their digital learning and communication during the university lockdown due to the pandemic. Specifically, it aims to answer the following two questions:

1. How do the students adapt their ways of learning and communication using digital tools/media during this period? How do they draw on different linguistic and semiotic resources for or in these adaptations?
2. How do these adaptations affect the students’ competences, beliefs, identities and social relationships in relation to learning and social networking in return?

4. Theoretical frameworks

Overall, we draw on two theoretical frameworks, digital literacies (Jones & Hafner, 2012) and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986, 1993, 2002) notions of habitus and capital to understand our participants’ experiences in online learning and social networking. As the following introduction will show, the concept of digital literacies can help us obtain an in-depth and situated understanding of the interactions between students and digital media in and for different activities such as learning and social networking. On the other hand, Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital will be effective in showing how students adjusted to the changing social and educational situations during the pandemic by drawing on and recalibrating their existing and shifting resources, experiences, beliefs and skills/competences across the boundaries of physical and virtual contexts. Therefore, these two theoretical frameworks can help illustrate how the students (strategically) integrate their communicative and social skills and experiences and digital tools/media to pursue various goals (e.g., learning, identity performance) in particular context.

4.1. Digital literacies and affordances

The impact of online learning and socializing on students’ digital literacy competence or practices has recently drawn many researchers’ attention (e.g., Burke, 2013; Chik & Benson, 2020; Sultana & Dovchin, 2021). Some scholars have framed digital literacy as the ability to synthesize information and knowledge, a process of knowledge assembly from different digital sources (Gilster, 1997; Bawden, 2008), and the capacity to ‘match the [digital] medium we use to the kind of information we are presenting and to the audience we are presenting it to’ (Lankoshe & Knoble, 2008, p. 3). From a more sociocultural perspective, Jones and Hafner (2012) view digital literacy as any practice of communication, relationship enactment and identity construction involving digital tools/media. From this perspective, human life is now filled with digital literacies which are diverse practices of communicating, relating, thinking and ‘being’ that are mediated through digital technologies or media. In other words, understanding digital literacies is about understanding how people (agentively) use digital technologies/media to fulfill their communicative and social purposes. Therefore, the concept of affordance, which refers to the technical and socially situated meaning-making potentials and possibilities of the material and semiotic tools/resources, is useful for us to analyze how and why people engage in different digital literacy practices (Jones & Hafner, 2012). As our analysis shows, many participants were able to develop more awarenesses and skills in digital learning and communication that are tied to the affordances of digital media they needed to engage in these activities.

4.2. Capital and habitus

This study employs Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and habitus to understand the investigated students’ online learning
and socializing experiences with a focus on how they developed or transformed certain awarenesses, practices, skills, dispositions, and identities during the pandemic. Individuals’ social and cultural assets are regarded as capital. Bourdieu (1986) identified three fundamental types of capital—economic, social, and cultural capital. All forms of capital can function as symbolic capital when acting as a “force, a power, or capacity for (actual or potential) exploitation” and are “therefore considered as legitimate” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 98). In moments of prioritization, the capital one possesses plays an important role in determining whether one occupies a dominant or subordinate position and enables one to exert social influence. Capital is convertible among its forms and the value of capital can change.

Bourdieu (2002) defined habitus as ‘a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action.’ (p. 27–28, emphasis original). Blommaert (2015) further explained that habitus is reflected in ‘every social activity—we always embody the sociohistorical realities that formed us as individuals who take specific (non-random) positions in a social field, with degrees of access to the material and symbolic capital that characterizes these positions, and the relationships of dominance or subordination they involve with others’ (p. 9). Habitus, as ‘a way of being, a habitual state... and in particular, a disposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination,’ is usually internalized and acquired through one’s cultural, social, historical, and ideological experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). Habitus enables individuals to establish a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), that is, to perceive themselves as having the rights and credentials needed to take up particular roles for different activities within a particular context. While habitus has certain constraints limiting the divergence of individuals’ actions from the usual activities of their social group, Bourdieu (1990, 2002) emphasized its possibilities for transforming and recreating itself, especially when individuals mobilize across contexts. Therefore, habitus involves ‘adaptation, adjustments and change, and in some cases, even transformation’ (Bokhorst-Heng & Silver 2017, p. 337).

Drawing on the notions of habitus and capital enables us to examine students’ individual agency in internalizing and transforming their own dispositions and perceptions in the virtual context and re-calibrating and validating capital across the virtual-physical boundary, as reflected in their digital literacy practices.

5. Data and methods

As part of a larger research project on the processes of internationalization at higher education institutions in the digital age, this study is based on semi-structured individual interviews with twenty-four Mainland Chinese students studying at EMI (English-as-medium-of-instruction) universities in Hong Kong. Since Hong Kong’s sovereignty change in 1997, the city’s higher education sector has experienced escalated internationalization based on the local government’s commitment to building Hong Kong into a regional and global education hub (Gu & Tong, 2021). One key means of internationalizing the local universities is attracting more fee-paying non-local students from Mainland China and other parts of the world, particularly Asia. Since the early 2010s, the enrolment of Mainland Chinese students in the public universities in Hong Kong has almost doubled to 12 percent of total enrollment (University Grants Committee, 2018), making them the biggest non-local student community in these institutions.

Another key internationalization strategy adopted by the local universities is the consistent use of EMI which can boost or maintain the universities’ global competitiveness in education and research (Gu et al., 2021). We therefore believe the selected students, who represent a major group of non-local students in the local universities that need to engage in learning and intercultural communication in English and possibly other languages, can offer rich information about how learning, intercultural communication and networking and digital media are intertwined in the internationalization of higher education in Hong Kong during the pandemic. While these students share Chinese ethnicity with most local students, most of them speak Putonghua as their first/native language which is mutually unintelligible with Cantonese, the dominant spoken language in the local society. At university, these Mainland Chinese students constantly engage in intercultural interactions with local Cantonese-speaking students and English-speaking international students, who now generally constitute no more than 20% of the total non-local student population in each local university (Gu & Tong, 2021), although they tend to have a stronger bond with other Mainland Chinese students. These three groups of students are the three main constituents of the student population at local universities.

The interviews were designed to investigate the Mainland Chinese students’ transformed social awareness and practices related to learning and social networking during the period of online teaching and learning in the academic year of 2020–2021. The interviewees, most of whom were year-3 or year-4 undergraduate students, were recruited across disciplines from four EMI universities in Hong Kong via snowball sampling (see Table 1), which coincidentally resulted in the predominantly female background of the interviewees. Students in these two years of study were chosen because they had accumulated a significant amount of learning and socialization experience in the host institutional and cultural contexts and experienced the tremendous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their study and life in Hong Kong. Supervised by the first author, two experienced research assistants conducted the semi-structured interviews in the language that the interviewees preferred, mostly Putonghua. The interview questions focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online learning, social activities, mobility and internationalization in higher education. Taking place between June and September 2020, most interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to the local COVID-19 outbreaks. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed with the consent from the participants. All the personally identifiable information was removed, and the interviewees’ names displayed as unassociated numerical codes.

Two independent trilingual researchers proficient in English, Putonghua and Cantonese transcribed the recorded interviews. All the Chinese data was translated into English. An independent researcher was invited to re-read the original Chinese excerpts and their English translations and any discrepancies between our and the invited researcher’s understanding were discussed with revisions made to reach agreement. NVivo 12 was adopted for data management. The researchers read and re-read the data transcriptions to note down the analytical points related to research questions. Open coding was then conducted to identify words, statements and phrases in relation to students’ digital literacy practices in learning and socializing, identity, drawing on linguistic and digital resources, and intercultural competence. Both semantic and latent coding were adopted to include the students’ salient discussion of academic and socializing experiences in online context, and interpretation of data segments. Codes with similar meanings were clustered. These clustered themes were then examined against the theoretical concepts of digital literacies, capital and habitus in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2013). We systematically identified and examined patterns of themes emerging from the interviews through iterative coding and re-coding with reference to digital literacies, learning, identity, agency, and international/intercultural experiences. The theoretical categories were formed to connect the emerging themes with our analytic narrative provided in the following section.
6. Findings

6.1. Enriching capital and habitus for learning: utilizing affordances of the online education mode

Becoming aware of affordances of the online learning channels, many participants were able to (gradually) adjust their learning style and/or strategies. For example, they mentioned that the online learning mode and restricted face-to-face meetings pushed them to adjust their original offline study schedule and learning style because “attending classes in the classroom and then going to the library for study was no longer the major rhythm of life as before but merely a part of it” (S18). In this way, some of them became more autonomous and inquisitive in learning, as S4 and S22 said below:

I found I developed stronger ability of autonomous learning. The teachers would upload the PPT and the recorded lessons onto the platform and sometimes I didn’t solely follow them in the teaching, but would explore more about certain topics study on my own after class. (S4).

I was away from the campus most of the time and had more time and motivation to search for the learning materials and to ponder about work opportunities and future direction. This is a kind of cognitive or thinking development (S22).

The two examples above show that the students expanded their learner habits by developing more autonomous learning skills, an important type of cultural capital for online/distant learning. They achieved this by realizing and capitalizing on the temporal and spatial features of online education.

Furthermore, some participants indicated that the breakout room function in Zoom had provided them opportunities to interact with more classmates and gain more exposure to different ideas, compared with the physical classroom where students tend to interact within fixed groups for discussion. For example,

The random grouping in Zoom made me more willing to share because I had chance to listen to different views. I became more open. In the big lecture, I was a little shy or anxious to answer questions to a large audience, but in the online classroom, I felt more comfortable and liked to take chance to speak. (S18)

The chat in the breakout rooms sometimes could decrease the awkwardness. I made new friends through breakout rooms. We didn’t know each other and discussed work in breakout rooms and then talked about something else and felt having more understanding of each other. I become more social in online mode. (S22)

By grouping a small number of students randomly for in-class discussions, the breakout room function increased S18’s exposure to more diverse views from different classmates and decreased her speaking anxiety compared to the physical classroom where one often has to speak in front of the whole class. Through academic and informal interactions in the Zoom breakout rooms, S22 extended the social circle in the online classes and became more sociable as she gained more understanding of classmates whom she might have had little chance of communicating with in real life. These examples suggest that, through participations in the breakout room activities, the students expanded their habits by becoming more sociable (potentially accumulating more social capital), open-minded and willing to communicate in class.

Some students also reported challenges in the online learning sessions. Some pointed out the lack of non-verbal expressions that can effectively facilitate teaching and learning in the online classroom. For example,

S2: My English is not that good. In offline classes, I could guess out the meanings through the teacher’s gestures and classmates’ responses. But in online session, without such gestures and responses, I need to understand through the teachers’ follow-up explanation and examples to guess the meaning and it became more difficult.

S10: In offline classes, when we could not understand the teacher, the teachers would provide further explanation because they could always capture my confusion expression. Sometimes they used Chinese to explain. But in online classes, the teachers could not capture our expressions and emotions and provided immediate feedback.

Faced with these difficulties, some participants were able to develop new digital literacy skills, which shows an enrichment of their cultural capital for learning, based on their learning experiences in the online classroom. For example, the students figured
out some ways to gain the teachers’ feedback effectively and appropriately in Zoom classes as in the following extract.

S21: When I met some points I was not clear about, I usually chose to ask the questions in an open way to the whole class rather than the private chat with the teacher.

Interviewer: Why?

S21: This way if more students responded, the teacher would provide timely explanation; if no other responses, the teacher would arrange a time to answer the questions, for example, after a section was done or provided feedback in the break time. I made myself familiar with the different functions of zoom.

Interviewer: How was it different from the offline session?
S21: In face-to-face teaching, if I raised hand to ask questions when the teacher was teaching, the teaching would be interrupted. So usually I asked questions after class, and it was not so timely.

In this way, the student expanded her learner habitus by acquiring new communicative skills for feedback elicitation in the new context, the virtual classroom, based on an affordance of Zoom that is realized through the chatbox. Also closely related to her learning experiences in the physical classroom, the expanded habitus enabled S21 to adopt a mixed approach when interacting with the teacher and classmates. This implies that familiarity about the affordances of online teaching and learning platforms and the ability to fully tap into them are key to the habitus transformation that can enable a student to become a more proficient digital learner.

Some participants mentioned the stimulating effect of the online classroom’s affordance for simultaneous question raising, especially for discussions about some heated topics. For example, S22: One time our teacher invited a guest lecturer who is a well-known scholar in the field. We asked him a lot of interesting questions, a lot of things related to the global issues. We asked questions at the same time in the chatbox and I found the questions raised by others were also very interesting. The professor sometimes summarized some questions and provided answers. I listened to the discussion very carefully and stated my views. I could feel the interactiveness.

Interviewer: Why this kind of online learning make you more involved?

S22: When a group of students asked questions, you were easy to be motivated and involved into the discussion. It is like a new discovery of myself and this will motivate me to be more involved in physical classroom in the future. Will be braver to speak.

As the chat box contained diverse questions from many students in the class, this prompted the teacher to categorize the questions and provide responses in an inclusive way to the group, enhancing their efficiency. In addition, S22 indicated that the habitus she developed in this virtual context, that is, increased willingness to communicate in in-class discussion will be transferred into the physical classroom. In other words, her initiative and ability to take advantage of the affordances of the online learning platform (as part of their newly developed digital habitus) are then likely to influence their offline learner habitus, which could be understood as habitus transferability. This data extract also shows that the highly interactive way of teaching and learning in the online lectures provides more opportunities for students to engage in collective digital literacy activities with the teacher so as to learn as a community rather than as individuals (Dorner, 2018) and to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative knowledge building in the classroom.

In addition, the participants developed more academic digital literacy skills in online learning. For example, they reported enhancement of skills in using different functions of Excel, PowerPoint, Word and in switching note-taking from handwritten mode to digital mode which includes more types of semiotic elements such as screenshots, drawings, and typed texts.

6.2. Enhancing cultural capital for social networking and intercultural communication: increasing multimodal digital literacies

Many participants reported increased use of non-linguistic resources in informal peer interactions in the dominant online mode of communication during the pandemic. For example, three students shared their experiences of using more emojis and/or animations when interacting with friends and classmates online.

Interviewer: How did you maintain the communication (with your friends and classmates)?

S19: Mainly online chat through video calls, sending photos, emojis, and animations. This would be good for the communication. The use of emojis or animations can help us with the social skills. For example, we ‘competed’ with each other with the emojis and this made us get familiar with each other more and understand more. We then felt less awkward when first meeting and this could help with making more friends.

S18: The use of emojis and animations made the online chatting interesting and easier for ice breaking. Different from the face to face one. This could kind of compensate the lack of face-to-face meetings in the past year.

S22: When we worked on some course projects out of class, and discussed online, the use of emojis could help shorten the distance and made the discussion easier.

These examples show that the students became more aware that visual resources commonly used on social media such as emojis and animations have the affordance of creating stronger senses of fun, emotional engagement or intimacy compared to text, and can effectively shorten the social distance between interlocutors. The students found it easier to expand their social circle when taking advantage of this affordance. The process of making use of their capital of multimodal digital literacy skills to expand social networks could be understood as the conversion from enhanced cultural capital to social capital.

On the other hand, some students were found to develop higher intercultural communicative competence such as enhanced intercultural communicative awareness and more openness to the cultural diversity through some multimodal, intercultural digital literacies over the university lockdown. As S19 said,

S19: The pandemic didn’t influence my intercultural communication, I preferred using social media for cross-cultural communication, because I learnt a lot in online classes and chatting with my friends, such as emojis, animations and language use norms. With these experiences, I will become more confident in face-to-face communication later. I learnt something about the suitable topics and the appropriate ways for communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.

This extract demonstrates the transferability of the intercultural digital literacy skills to the intercultural communicative competence in physical world. Some students further commented on the online/virtual mode of intercultural interactions in the university. For example,

S6: Now for the webinars, all interested parties, wherever in the world, can attend. The students can learn the ways the scholars deliver webinars and online workshop, and the follow-up discussion. Attending these events helped me understand more the way of speaking and writing in online mode.

S17: If all use online tools, this is also an opportunity and we interacted more frequently with students with different cultural backgrounds. The students can make better use of the online resources the university provided and the university can offer more updated resources and platforms for us to learn and communicate.

According to S6, these events could help students enhance their academic digital literacy knowledge and skills. S17, on the other hand, indicated that the accessible online communication tools
have the affordance of making intercultural peer interactions easier and more efficient and that up-to-date digital tools from the university can further facilitate intercultural communication among students.

6.3. Re-validating multilingual/multicultural capital in other learning and communicative contexts: resisting the online English regime through digital multiliteracies

Some participants mentioned that they have reduced opportunities for using multiple languages and tended to rely more on English, the medium of instruction of their universities, in online intercultural communication:

S3: I found I seldom used other languages in online classes, social activities, webinars and workshops. I mainly use English but seldom speak it. Before when face-to-face mode was normal, I used different languages, also code-switching between English, Chinese and even Korean (which I was learning on my own) when talking to different people. Although I had better sense of communicating in English in online, the internationalization should have a lot of differences, not in terms of language, we rely on English more.

S7: During the lockdown, I spoke English less but used written English in all my academic works and online learning. I felt I used less the other languages and my third language, Spanish, hardly had chance to use.

S6: English was much more used in online learning and international communication, even though I attended a number of online activities such as global experience tour.

Interviewer: How is the global experience tour like?

S6: These are held on Zoom. The university introduced the tour themes and the students were allocated into different theme-based groups according to their interests and backgrounds. In each group, some global issues were discussed among members from different places, followed by presentations and those with outstanding performance will have chance for the following tour or physical ones. All in English but we discussed about a lot of issues globally.

Interviewer: Do you use other resources in discussion?

S6: Yes, pictures, videos, emojis, etc. I also practiced more presentation skills, learning to do it better through using moving images, sound, layout, tone, pitch and color, etc. Because only a small picture of mine will be shown in the presentation.

A tendency for monolingual use of English was salient in the above excerpts. S3 reported that she didn’t mix or switch between different languages in the online mode of learning and communication while relying more on written English. Despite having developed more cultural and pragmatic awareness of digital English literacy, she showed concerns about the lack of linguistic diversity, which she viewed as important to the university’s commitment to internationalization, in the online intercultural communication. S6 also reported English as a dominant language in online activities she participated in, even in an event themed with globalism where discussions took place in multilingual and multicultural groups.

The three excerpts above suggest that a (more) powerful monolingual regime of English in intercultural communication emerges in the online mode of learning and socialization, one that excludes/marginalizes and ‘devalues’ the students’ multilingual capital. Nevertheless, S6 indicated that she developed stronger multimodal digital literacy skills for academic purposes despite having to submit to the English regime in intercultural communication in the online learning mode.

Furthermore, the participants were found to exercise their own agency to validate their multilingual and multicultural capital in other contexts than formal English-dominated teaching and learning platforms. Some participants stated that while their multilingual skills (which gained value in the face-to-face mode more easily) could not be fully utilized in activities/events in the university, they were able to use the proficiency in understanding multilingual content and producing and disseminating multilingual materials (e.g., video clips) in their own online channels (e.g., YouTube) during the lockdown, to learn about others’ opinions and to voice out their own views. These activities subsequently helped them bring new ideas and perspectives into their online intercultural communication. For example,

S9: I created video clips to share the interesting parts of my life and study during lockdown and posted on the social media channel. I learned some skills of using pictures, subtitles, and animations, etc. I used Chinese with English subtitle.

Interviewer: Why?

S9: More audience can understand. Later when I have time, I will use English with Chinese subtitles.

In producing the video clips, drawing on his multilingual proficiency, the student developed skills of adopting multimodal digital tools to produce and disseminate multilingual and multicultural discourse and knowledge. In other words, the student was able to develop and deploy multilingual and multimodal digital literacy skills or digital multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) which emphasizes the multi-semiotic and multilingual/multicultural aspects of diverse literacy competences or practices. This shows the development of a translilingual and transcultural habitus based on one’s abilities, positionings and experiences in relation to different linguistic varieties and cultures (cf. transnational habitus [Lam and Warriner, 2012; Chang and Chang, 2019]). By deploying these literacy skills in other online platforms than the common ones at school, the students took the initiative to explore the re-validation of their multilingual skills and repertoires.

7. Discussion

7.1. Navigating shifting mode of learning and communication: enriching and transferring habitus and capital

The findings of our study reveal many participants adjusted to the ‘new normal’ mode of learning and communication during the pandemic by expanding, redeveloping and/or transferring their habitus and capital for learning and social networking across different contexts such as the physical classroom, (formal) online teaching and learning and social media. They drew on their own agency to recalibrate the habitus and capital across the boundaries of online and physical learning and communication. For example, some became more autonomous and proficient digital learners by partly drawing on their past offline learning experiences, enhancing their awareness and knowledge about affordances and constraints of common teaching and learning platforms and strengthening their ability to take advantage of the affordances to their own interests (e.g., eliciting effective teacher feedback). On the other hand, some were able to flexibly apply their prior knowledge and skills related to social media to shifting contexts of learning and social networking to maintain or even expand intercultural peer interactions and network in and out of class during this period. Realizing the increased dominance of English, which they speak as a second/additional language, in online learning and intercultural communication in university activities, some of them had a growing concern about the falling importance of multilingualism and multiculturalism in this institutional setting and agentively re-validated their multilingual capital on social media with a wider and more diverse multicultural audience/community. Therefore, we have painted a concrete picture of how university students can transform and transfer their awareness and knowledge, competences, habits and practices related to learning and social networking as they move across different settings of learning and communication to adjust to the abrupt changes that the pan-
demic has brought to their usual learning and social activities. In particular, these coping or adjustment strategies foreground some participants’ agency to maintain or enhance engagement in major academic and social activities by blending or transferring individual habitus and capital between the fields of online teaching and learning and virtual social networking, showing the blurred boundary between these settings in the students’ life during the pandemic and great educational value of social media (Chau & Lee, 2017; Chik & Benson, 2020).

7.2. The empowering role of digital multiliteracies in online international higher education

Meanwhile, our findings have shown that diverse digital multiliteracies can empower university students to address COVID-induced challenges in academic and social activities in the context of (especially EMI) international higher education. As we have illustrated, some students shifted their multimodal literacy practices (e.g., relying more on typing/texting, using more visual resources) to interact with teachers and other students productively and effectively in online classes and/or intercultural communication. Other students developed more multilingual and multicultural digital literacy practices on social media (e.g., making and publishing multilingual videos about personal life) to circumvent increased English monolingualism in their university activities and re-validate their own multicultural competence and identity during the pandemic. Therefore, the increased engagement in these diverse digital literacies not only enabled many students to learn and communicate effectively in the online mode but also helped them develop higher intercultural competence to deal with the linguistically and culturally dynamic, polycentric and diverse context of the online mode, even with very limited offline intercultural contact (see also Cao & Meng, 2020). Based on these observations, we would argue institutions implementing international higher education, particularly through the digital mode, should devote more effort to digital multiliteracies education for both teachers and students to equip them with adequate knowledge and skills to perform more effective and inclusive intercultural teaching, learning and networking in international higher education with a dominant medium of instruction. Furthermore, the excellent affordances of social media for digital multiliteracies evidenced by our participants’ experiences add to the great educational potential of social media in international higher education.

8. Conclusions

This study has revealed how a group of non-local students at EMI universities in Hong Kong were coping with challenges in study and intercultural communication during the COVID-induced university lockdown in 2020–2021 by agentively engaging in habitus transformation and capital recapitulation across different settings of learning and social life. It shows many of them were able to (re)develop and/or (re)deploy multimodal, multilingual and multicultural digital literacy practices to facilitate learning and intercultural communication in the context of higher education by combining their prior knowledge, competences and practices with shifting technological, semiotic and socio-cultural affordances and constraints of the digital media they rely on during this challenging period. In this way, the study contributes to the growing body of research on international higher education under the impact of COVID–19 by (1) shedding light on international/non-local students’ grounded experiences, in particular their strategy uses in coping with COVID-related challenges and (2) drawing attention to both formal learning activities and social activities in the massively digitalized student life as the boundary is increasingly blurred by the pandemic situation. Based on our findings, we would make two main suggestions for institutions delivering international higher education in addressing challenges brought by the ongoing COVID–19 pandemic. The first suggestion is to draw more on students’ rich prior knowledge, competences and experiences when helping them adjust to the new dominant ways of learning and communication given rise to by the pandemic. Echoing some recent research (e.g., Chau & Lee, 2017; Chik & Benson, 2020; Sultana & Dovchin, 2021), the second is to make greater use of diverse social media with abundant semiotic, social and cultural affordances to provide rich additional learning opportunities, particularly in the context of international/intercultural higher education. Our study has two important limitations that can and should be addressed by future research. First, our research was situated in relatively high socio-economic conditions which may limit our findings and arguments to certain societal and higher education contexts. In our study, the HEIs could provide abundant technological support and learning resources for students to engage in online and hybrid-mode educational and social activities and the students enjoyed access to different digital devices and platforms and possessed a significant amount of prior knowledge and skills in digital communication. Future research on students’ digital literacy competences and practices in international higher education should pay attention to more diverse social, cultural, economic and institutional contexts. The second limitation of our research is the heavy reliance on interview data coupled with a small amount of direct evidence of participants’ digital literacy practices. Future research should combine more sources of data to delineate and analyze students’ grounded experiences in digital learning and communication in greater detail and nuances.

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Gee (1990), Jones (2021)

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