

Researching Chinese Students in the UK – the Use of Ethnography in Social Media Studies

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Abstract

The growing prevalence of digital media has led to an increasing number of studies investigating its role in people's lives. Traditionally, ethnographers go to the fieldsite physically to understand people and their culture. Now, with a large amount of social interaction taking place online, ethnographers have also begun attempting to use digital methods to understand people's online practices, interactions, and cultural production. This paper documents both online and offline ethnographic methods employed in a pilot study that set out to understand the ways that Chinese students portray their lives on social media when studying at UK universities. With a focus on in-depth reflections on methodologies and data collection processes, this paper aims to provide a point of reference for researchers who are interested in doing ethnography in the digital field.

Keywords: social media, (digital) ethnography, methodology, fieldwork

Introduction

Previous literature has often used quantitative methods to analyse people's social media behaviours and how it relates to other factors, such as their mental health and learning abilities (such as Ivie et al., 2020; Sharma & Behl, 2022). Yet, to understand people's subjective experiences of their interactive engagement with social media, it is necessary to apply qualitative methods to explore the process of their meaning-making. In recent years ethnographers who traditionally use observation and interviews in the physical field have now started to apply digital methods to understand online culture and people's digital lives. This paper has described, analysed and evaluated both online and offline ethnographic methods used in a pilot study conducted at Durham University in 2022. In particular, this paper focused on the researcher's reflections of applying both online and offline methods in studying people's social media use with the aim of offering some references for researchers who are interested in doing ethnography in the digital field.

Living and studying abroad can be both fascinating and challenging (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Chinese students' lived experiences in western society can be significantly different from their previous years of living in China (Hansen, 2015). Social media is usually considered a platform not only for social networking but also for self-presentation and identity construction when people selectively share certain aspects of their lives (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Against this backdrop, my research question is to understand *how Chinese students studying in UK universities use social media as a self-presentation tool*. This pilot study aims to investigate the ways in which Chinese students portray their lives of studying abroad on social media. Ethnographic fieldwork was used to explore their online and offline practices with a focus on their self-presentation on social media in the process of intercultural adaptation in the UK. In this paper, the research process is first detailed, including the methods used in the study and ethical considerations, followed by a brief report on research findings. More discussion is centred on methodological reflection and finally a conclusion is presented.

Pilot study – Using Ethnography

Ethnography offers an excellent framework to understand cultural practices and complexities in a visceral and sensory way (Markham, 2018). A distinctive feature of doing ethnography, as opposed to other methods, is to study people's behaviours in a natural setting rather than under a condition created by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Also, the nature of ethnographic research is usually exploratory and is characterised by thick description on the

cultural phenomenon being studied (Geertz, 1973). With the aim of understanding Chinese students' lived experiences in the UK and the localised meanings of their online posts, ethnography is considered the appropriate approach to achieve research goals.

In light of the “embedded, embodied and everyday” internet in people’s lives (Hine, 2015), the research field site is no longer restricted to the physical and bounded sites that traditional ethnographers used to attend to. Instead of studying the digital space alone, the online and offline fields are usually viewed as a large blended field (Bluteau, 2021) and the field site can also become a field flow which is organised around tracing relationships and interconnections across different environments (Hine, 2000). Assuming that young people’s cultural and social life is a continuous virtual-real experiences (Bennett, 2020; Wilson, 2006) and online materials are often decontextualised (Lane, 2016), the integration of both offline and online methods is considered desirable for a comprehensive understanding of the relations between their online and offline practices.

Convenience and snowball sampling were used for recruiting Chinese students who were doing Postgraduate Taught programs at Durham University at that time. The researcher firstly contacted eight students who she had met before. All of them agreed to participate. Because of the imbalanced gender ratio, the researcher asked one male student to introduce some of his male friends. Finally, three male students and seven female students were recruited for this study.

There are three phases of data collection in this study. First, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were firstly conducted at participants’ convenience. Before the interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of their study and made the request of following all of their social media accounts (including Chinese and western platforms). Interview questions revolved around their social media use and lived experience in Durham. Follow-up questions were also asked based on their answers. All interviews lasted between 40 minutes to one hour.

Second, the researcher conducted two-week online observation by tracking participants’ online activities across various social media platforms (some only had one account while others used multiple platforms). The researcher read their online posts every day, took screenshots and interacted with them by “liking” and “commenting” which also helped to build rapport. When something they shared online was unclear or confusing, the researcher would message them and ask for more contextual information and clarification. Preliminary data analysis was then

conducted for informing appropriate fieldwork activities (Spradley, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The third stage involved offline participant observation. Some social events were deliberately chosen which were often shared on their social media as highlights of their life in the UK, such as college formal dinner, outdoor activities and parties with friends. Observing and participating in their social activities brought several opportunities for informal conversations and group discussion. Fieldnotes were written at the end of the day.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including their consent on accessing to their social media profiles and posts. It was made clear to participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point without explanations. Besides, protecting participants' privacy and identities is a key ethical issue in social science research (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). Compared to offline contexts, ensuring anonymity is more challenging in relation to the publication of online data (Dawson, 2014) as search engines can be very effective in tracing the online content back to its origins (Zimmer, 2010). Therefore, it is particularly important to minimise the searchability of online data, e.g., direct quotations from their online posts should be avoided (Fenton & Parry, 2022). One possible solution is to paraphrase what they have said online without changing the initial intended meanings (Robinson & Schulz, 2011). Nevertheless, most of the textual posts written by the participants in this study were in Chinese, it is thus less problematic if the results are reported in English while making sure their original meanings have been delivered with accuracy.

While removing all personal identifiers in research outputs can ensure external confidentiality, there is a possibility that research subjects can identify each other due to the sampling strategies and small number of samples in this study (Tolich, 2004). Therefore, all data collected has to be held in the strictest confidence and the results should be reported in a general and conclusive way rather than in the format of individual narratives. Furthermore, the researcher has to keep alert when having casual conversations with participants to avoid revealing any personal information.

Researcher's access to online data depends on their participants' privacy settings on social media platforms. When one decides to publish something, very often they are able to choose who can view this particular post (e.g., sharing with everyone or selected contacts). While researchers would like to have access to all of their participants' online activities, it is important

to respect their participants' privacy and their choices of whom they want to share their online content with. It is likely that the researcher can only access to part of their participants' online presentation. It is also possible that people craft their online presentation because of the presence of the researcher. Building rapport and trust with participants is thus essential for gaining rich and trustworthy data. Participants in this study were told that they were expected to let the researcher access everything they have shared on social media but they did not have to if they had any concerns. All participants in this study indicated that they were happy to share everything with the researcher. However, this can be a challenge for researchers who are not familiar with any of their participants and thus need much more time to develop relationships and mutual trust.

Results

Data for this study consisted of interview transcripts, participants' online posts and the researcher's fieldnotes. While reporting research results is not the focus of this paper, some key themes were identified and will be outlined here.

1) Temporality

The temporary mode of living plays an important role in Chinese students' choices of online posts. One participant posted on her social media every day since she came to the UK aiming to keep a record of all key moments of her life abroad. Another participant was a vlogger (video content producer) and she mentioned that she did not take videos in her own place in China due to privacy concerns but now in Durham she did not worry that too much as her accommodation was a "temporary home".

2) Food, independency, and connections

"Cooking and food" is one distinct theme of people's online posts. Many participants shared photos of either cooking Chinese food or eating out in restaurants. For Chinese students who had not known how to cook before they came to the UK, cooking is a new skill they have learned and an important symbol of independence. In addition, getting together to have Chinese meals is usually seen as important social occasions for Chinese students, particularly at Chinese traditional festivals.

3) Embracing local landscape and cultural activities

Students often share natural and cultural landscape such as sunset, churches, museums and castles in the UK or other places when they travel around. Photos of them attending local

cultural activities are also commonly seen on their social media as a representation of their cultural experiences in the UK such as going to college formals, Bonfire events, and Christmas parties.

4) Richness and superiority: “upper-class” lifestyle

Despite their varied level of engagement with social media, a majority of their online posts have represented and reflected a “positive” and “colourful” life. One participant talked about the stereotype of “Chinese students studying abroad”- who are often rich, have lots of freedom and travel a lot. Sharing a “positive image” of their lived experience abroad is also a presentation or proof to their parents that it is worth the money that they have invested in them. Some people felt delighted when receiving comments such as “upper class”, “posh”, and “sophisticated” from their friends back home. Compared to their peers, these students in the UK have the privilege to experience the so-called “superior” and “upper-class” lifestyles in the western society in many Chinese people’s view. Thus, some students also expressed their concern that their frequent “showing-off” would annoy other people on their social media.

Methodological reflection

Compared to other methods especially those featuring standardised data collection procedures, ethnography is distinctive for its emphasis on researchers’ “being there” and immersing themselves in the setting, which enables them to hear their participants’ voices and understand their culture and ways of living through their own perspectives (Hine, 2015). Therefore, instead of attempting to produce objective accounts, the researcher’s participation and interpretation of the context is an essential element of ethnographic studies. A more “objective” method that tries to minimise the effect of researchers in the study is probably able to provide a broad overview of Chinese students’ online presentations through categorisation and computational analysis. However, this kind of approach is unlikely to gain contextualised and in-depth knowledge of their interactive engagement with digital platforms and the logic of choice of their online sharing. Ethnography has thus been adopted in this study with the aim of understanding this group of students in a visceral and sensory way (Markham, 2017). Nevertheless, applying both online and offline methods does not mean that researchers are able to trace every aspect of their participants’ behaviours and digital engagement. In order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of individual feelings and experiences in digital social contexts, Markham (2017) proposed an alternative approach - to train her participants to become autoethnographers. Although it helps obtain rich data which may not be accessible by other

methods, it requires a high level of commitment from participants as well as much more time and dedication from researchers, which may not be practical for pilot or short-term studies.

Ethnography is usually viewed as an adaptive approach which means the ethnographer is required to adjust their research strategies based on their emerging understandings of the context (Atkinson, 2007; Hine, 2015). Originally, I planned to do another round of interviews after online and offline observations, but later I found that I did not have the time to do that and alternatively I could just ask questions during the fieldwork. Also, I went grocery shopping with one of my participants in an attempt to observe his daily activities, but it turned out that the walking interview I did on the way was more useful than observing how he shopped in a grocery store. It is therefore important and necessary for ethnographers to be flexible and adjust their plans accordingly.

In all social science studies, especially ethnography where lots of interaction between researchers and participants take place, the researchers' role and positionality should be critically examined in terms of how it would potentially affect the knowledge production process (Davies, 2007). In this study, my identity as a member of the research group has both brought advantages and challenges. Firstly, participants recruitment was not difficult as I had already known some Chinese students and I could also ask them to recommend their friends. Also, sharing the same identity as Chinese students to a large extent has brought us closer naturally. Therefore, gaining access to the field, which is often seen as a challenge for many ethnographic studies (Gobo, 2008), turned out to be relatively easy for the researcher. However, as an "insider", it is necessary to reflect on to what extent my assumptions and preconceived notions have potentially shaped the approach to my research, including how the interviewing questions are structured and which is perceived as "significant" to be written down in my fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2001). One key ethnographic challenge is to balance potential insider positioning and the stranger perspective (Dyck, 2000; Miller & Glassner, 2004). While being an "insider" has helped me develop empathetic relationships with my participants and reconstruct their accounts from their point of view (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004), it is likely that I may have taken some phenomena or useful insights for granted as I was working in a familiar territory. In addition, being a female researcher has also affected my relationships with participants. It was quite evident that female students were more open to me and accepted me as an observer of part of their lives while males seemed reluctant or hesitated to share very personal feelings. I also found it awkward when a guy asked me if I was going to enter his room to "observe him". Alternative interpretations could be expected if the study is

conducted by a non-Chinese or male researcher, yet I would argue that it would not make my interpretations less valuable by acknowledging my own positionality and limitations.

As a novice researcher, I was very excited about going to the “field”, interacting with my participants and staying in the setting for as long as possible to collect as much data, which leads to the ‘it’s all happening elsewhere’ syndrome (Atkinson, 2007). Consequently, there was not much time left for me to reflect on what I have done and the implications for next steps. While being engaged in their lives is important for obtaining rich data, it is equally important to leave time for reflections and initial data analysis for further adjustments. In addition, the timing of data collection can also affect the kind of data one is able to collect (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). When I started data collection, the Epiphany Term at Durham University had ended, and students were having their Easter break. As a result, I did not have the opportunity to follow their daily routines, i.e., going to their classes, workshops or campus events etc. A nine-month ethnographic study from September/October when most of the Chinese students arrive in the UK until the summertime of the next year when they finish their studies would be preferable. Additionally, knowledge is co-produced by the researcher and their participants in ethnography and more creative collaboration could be explored in the digital research process (Pink et al., 2016). One of my participants was a vlogger but she went travelling during my study. Otherwise, I would be very interested in observing the process of her video production and even co-produce media content with her to gain in-depth understanding of their digital engagement.

A final note is related to the researcher’s privacy. I have followed all my participants’ social media accounts to trace their online activities as part of my data collection, which also made myself “exposed” to them as I used my personal social media accounts. To protect the researcher’s privacy, creating a new research account instead of using personal accounts could be a strategic solution (Robinson & Schulz, 2009). Besides that, one of my participants shared a group photo of us (including me and his friends) on his social media without asking me for permission although it was not shared in the “public space” and only visible to his friends. Nevertheless, I should have expected this to be happening as I purposely chose to participate in these “fun activities”. As for most ethnographic studies, it is important to build long-term researcher-participant relationships and researchers may always have to negotiate these issues with their participants in the process of interaction.

Conclusion

Ethnography is distinctive in that it is able to offer an excellent framework to understand a complex cultural phenomenon (Markham, 2017). Before conducting the study, I had been “observing” this phenomenon for over one year since I was a master’s student in the UK. Yet, observing their online activities as a “researcher” is different from my previous “observation” in mundane lives in that it involves a more systematic approach for the purpose of answering the research question (Atkinson, 2007). It has been a challenge for me to shift my role from a social media user to a researcher and critically analyse the subsequent data. The purpose of my study is not to detail individual narratives only but to study a broader class of phenomena of Chinese students studying abroad and their characteristics (Williams, 2000) based on the assumption that this group of people share collective consciousness (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004). Although Dodier and Motlow (1995) argued that individuals may not behave in ways according to a common cultural framework in digitalised society, the results of this study have demonstrated some collective self-presentation on social media platforms.

The value of ethnography is not limited to making sense of the social world, but reflected in its implications (Atkinson, 2007; Markham, 2017), which in my case can be providing useful insights for Chinese students who plan to pursue studies abroad as well as international offices in UK universities. While doing ethnography can be a very time-consuming process, both the researcher and their participants are able to benefit from the study. For me, the experience and reflection of doing fieldwork I gained from this study is very helpful for developing methodology for my own PhD research. Also, some participants mentioned that their participation was therapeutic by having the opportunities to talk, share and reflect. Although my research focused on Chinese students’ online presentations, their personal narratives have also revealed some other interesting aspects such as their perspectives on social networking and relationships, the advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad, their attitudes towards western culture. These can not only facilitate my understanding of their online self-presentation but can potentially provide suggestions for future research.

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