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Digital Dis/Connection as Everyday Boundary Work Among Hong Kong BN(O) Migrants in the UK

Jade Jiewen Deng and Jason Pridmore

Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Jason Pridmore (pridmore@eshcc.eur.nl)

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Abstract

While digital media can be seen to keep alive social connections among migrants across borders, the impact of how digital disconnection has redrawn migrants' boundaries has not been adequately researched. Migrants subjected to the dual border-and-boundary work of Western host countries and their non-Western home countries make for complicated self–other boundary narratives. This study explores the everyday boundary work of migrants originating from Hong Kong, a former British colony, who have chosen to relocate to the UK through the British National (Overseas) (BN[O]) visa scheme. The scheme was catalysed by the 2019 political upheaval in Chinese Hong Kong and the UK–Hong Kong colonial affiliation. Through the lens of dis/connection assemblage, we conceptualise digital dis/connections as a form of boundary work and conduct in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of 14 BN(O)s. We demonstrate that digital disconnection can be seen as a socio-political practice related to identity regulation by situating BN(O)s' digital media practices within the political projects of belonging in the UK, Hong Kong, and China. Through a matrix of disconnected approaches, BN(O)s shape boundaries around identity politics in terms of social positions, a sense of belonging, and social relations. The political meaning of digital disconnection is highlighted through its fracture of connected space-time and resilient management of social relationships.

Keywords

borders; boundary work; digital connection; digital disconnection; Hong Kong; migration

1. Introduction

Following the handover from the UK to China on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong has been governed under the "one country, two systems" regime as committed to by the Sino-British Joint Declaration. However, 2019 saw the largest pro-democracy movement, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement

(Anti-ELABM), which opposed China's ability to extradite criminals from Hong Kong as an infringement of Hong Kong's judicial autonomy (Tang & Cheng, 2022). In response to Anti-ELABM's challenge to the Communist regime, the Chinese government passed the National Security Law in 2020 (Lee & Chan, 2023, p. 921). Its jurisdiction extends beyond local permanent residents ("Hong Kong national security law," 2022). China's extraterritorial jurisdictions, such as the enactment of the National Security Law, have been seen as a democratic setback in Hong Kong (Fong, 2021), as evidenced by the incarceration of hundreds of pro-democracy legislators and activists and the legalisation of press controls (Hamlett, 2023; Lee & Chan, 2023).

In the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a British National (Overseas) (BN[O]) passport was regarded as merely a travel document (Summers, 2021). However, the National Security Law's perceived breach of commitment to Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and democratic freedoms for Hong Kong people caused the UK to launch the BN(O) "5+1" visa scheme for Hong Kong residents who had filed for BN(O) citizenship prior to June 30, 1997. This enabled them to apply for British citizenship within one year of residing in the UK for five years (Home Office, 2021). The current re-empowerment of the BN(O) visa for the right of abode in the UK states "a 'Global Britain' that has 'taken back control' of its borders" (Benson, 2021, p. 14). By December 2022, 105,200 BN(O)s had arrived in the UK (Home Office, 2023), which is "one of the biggest waves of non-EU migration to the UK in postwar history" (Hawkins & James, 2023, para. 8).

A body of literature has examined the mutual influence of bordering practices and individual boundary-making in Europe (Cassidy et al., 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2020; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). However, they primarily focus on the tensions between Western governments and minority migrants within the EU, such as Roma, or forced migrants like refugees and asylum seekers. Insufficient research has been conducted on a vague category of non-Western migrants that falls between "potential displaced persons," "indentured migrants," and "anticipatory refugees" (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022, p. 184), such as Hong Kong citizens with BN(O) status. The UK categorises the BN(O) visa as one of the "safe and legal" humanitarian routes that highlights the unique case of Hong Kong people in the context of the UK Conservative government's stringent border and immigration controls (Benson et al., 2024). However, as Benson et al. (2024) point out, the BN(O) visa requires beneficiaries to pay a sum of money to apply for the visa and support a minimum of six months of living expenses, which "sets a precedent in paying for protections" (p. 266), in contrast to other free humanitarian paths. This article situates BN(O) migrants' boundary work within mundane scenarios, focusing on the embeddedness of borderwork performed by people and states in everyday life (Rumford, 2008, 2013). It contributes to critical understandings of migration in the context of identity categorisation (Cassidy, 2020).

As the notion of "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008) illustrates, digital media can create a sense of concurrent presence in migrants' home and host countries to maintain transnational relationships. On the one hand, the connectedness of digital technology helps to develop bonding and bridging capital in both places of origin and local communities (Komito, 2011), as well as new attachments, a sense of belonging, and identities (Ponzanesi, 2020). On the other hand, digital connectivity may cause people's fatigue of perpetually online digital devices and privacy anxiety due to context collapse (Figueiras & Brites, 2022; Mols & Pridmore, 2021). For certain categories of migrants, such as refugees, digital connectivity may become "an uncomfortable imposition" (Awad & Tossell, 2021), leading to top-down experiences of surveillance, stress, trauma, and distress (Moran, 2023; Witteborn, 2022).

An inquiry into digital disconnection will thus contribute to contextualising individuals and communities to understand their agency and meaning-making of choosing not to use (certain) media. However, in an age where digital media are increasingly ubiquitous and saturated across the globe, digital disconnection as a tactic of resistance has hardly become prominent (Jorge, 2019). As Figueiras and Brites (2022, p. 838) indicate "disconnection is not the opposite of connection, but a way of establishing boundaries for connectivity in digital life," this suggests that an individual's choice between digital connection and disconnection may not be binary but rather selective and flexible. Drawing from concepts of Lamont and Molnár's (2002) boundary work concerning one's identity and Lim's (2020) dis/connection assemblage, we take BN(O) migrants as an entry point to discuss migrants' digital dis/connection practices as a resilient aggregation in doing everyday boundary work entangled in intricate power and media landscapes. Through interviews with 14 BN(O)s and thematic analysis, we examined how they navigated the tension created by the interactive border-and-boundary work within a transnational context. Our research questions focus on (a) what digitally connected and disconnected tactics are applied by BN(O)s in boundary-making, and, particularly, (b) what meanings of digital disconnection for migration are embodied by BN(O)s' boundary work.

2. Borders, Bordering, and Boundary Work

The notion of borders transcends geographical scope and migratory infrastructure. The discursive construction of a nation relies on the imagined and symbolic spatial understanding of local inhabitants towards "us" and "them" (Anderson, 2006; Fischer, 2020). That is, borderwork has not only been practiced on territorial margins but also permeated everyday life performed by institutions and individuals, which is everyday bordering (Scott & Sohn, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Rumford (2013, p. 170) suggests studying individual engagement in everyday bordering, as "borderwork…causes us to rethink the issue of who is responsible for making, dismantling and shifting borders, rather than rely upon the assumption that this is always the business of the state." Concretely, social agents' process of bordering creates "socio-cultural, political and geographic distinctions" (Yuval-Davis, 2013, p. 10) in particular social positions and time-places (Yuval-Davis, 2013). In the political agendas of Western democracies, this bordering construction that classifies "us" and "them" is related to "different constructions of identity, belonging, and citizenship" (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019, p. 7). Thus, in contemporary society with hyper-connectivity and mobility, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) advocate that rather than seeing borders as "new divisive imaginaries" (p. 18) and discourses, scholarship should investigate the "transformative functions" (p. 18) of borders and the colonised and racialised inclusion and exclusion they embody.

Lamont and Molnár (2002) divide boundaries into social boundaries and symbolic boundaries based on the material and conceptual classification of "objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (p. 168). The course of organising and producing these two kinds of boundaries is defined as boundary work, which refers to "the kind of typification system or interferences, concerning similarities and differences that groups mobilise to define who they are" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 171). Boundary work is achieved by a set of actors, including "nation-states, the media, political parties, and actors in everyday life" (Fischer et al., 2020, p. 480). Given that symbolic boundaries are "at the intersubjective level" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 169), boundary work in this article primarily refers to individual symbolic boundary work. Boundary work is a crucial tool for migrants to position their identities in the host country by leveraging their repertories such as cultural and educational capital (Bygnes, 2022).

Far from seeing borders and boundaries as two isolated dimensions, this text considers them as an interactive and negotiated process embedded in individual mundane lives. Borders regulate and empower social boundaries, while the consolidation of specific boundaries further naturalises imaginary borders in everyday life (Scheibelhofer, 2020). Cassidy's (2020) research on borderwork and boundary work, which Romanians in the UK renegotiate with local citizens and government, indicates that the intersection of border-and-boundary work better articulates the synergistic ordering and othering (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) of the two towards a specific group. In this sense, we adopt Lamont and Molnár's (2002) boundary work approach, and aim to associate migrants' boundary-making represented in their digital practices with the influence of borderwork (Cassidy, 2020).

3. Digital Dis/Connection Assemblage

Based on the impact of actors and social structures, Kaun and Treré (2020) categorise previous disconnection studies into two types: individual voluntary and involuntary media non-use. On the one hand, the former reflects more autonomy in self-management and political participation. Disconnection may produce positive impacts on personal well-being and health (Figueiras & Brites, 2022). For instance, a digital detox is seen as an authentic lifestyle choice for individuals to reduce stress (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020); digital disconnection allows one to better fulfil social responsibilities in reality (Moe & Madsen, 2021) and to negotiate ambivalent self-identities (Agai, 2022). In terms of political practice, digital disconnection can also be viewed as "a powerful tool for political mobilization and social transformation" (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 631). People can perform "social media abstinence" (Fish, 2017) to resist the repression of authorities or digital capitalism. Such grassroots lifestyle politics and resistance exhibited as a digital refusal (Kaun & Treré, 2020) may catalyse collective activism (Natale & Treré, 2020) and attain "social regulation" at the moral level (Fish, 2017, p. 366).

On the other hand, the latter demonstrates that historical and material conditions restrict the possibility of individual disconnection. Disconnection exhibits a systematic asymmetry, as it symbolises the privilege of the Global North, whilst the Global South may lack the essential infrastructure to facilitate such disconnection (Treré, 2021). Moreover, digital disconnection can function as a form of repression, in which governments and corporate institutions can suppress the resistance of subaltern actors strategically, such as through a mandatory cessation of digital services (Kaun & Treré, 2020). In response to this power-dominated disconnection, Lim (2020) highlights human agency in terms of resistance tactics from the political activism perspective and the interpersonal dimension. The dynamic of "dis/connection assemblage" (Lim, 2020) stresses that individuals and transformed collectives can leverage tactics of dis/connection across different media platforms and in online and offline sites to generate temporary visible and invisible political spaces to sustain de-territorialised and de-temporalised activism.

In general, the aforementioned studies of digital disconnection appear to show that connection and disconnection are a kind of socio-political boundary work traversing spatio-temporality (Jorge, 2019). We suggest that Lim's (2020) "dis/connection assemblage" framework effectively articulates media tactics by which people selectively differentiate and accommodate the boundaries of particular subjects and others to counter power in contrast to simply adopting seemingly defaulted measures of connectivity (Kaun & Treré, 2020). Temporally, the multiple enactments of this aggregation enable the ability to briefly gain control over self-realisation and social relations from hypermediated digital life and rapid capitalism (Jorge,

2019). Meanwhile, activists orchestrate long-term or short-term resistance through this provisionally established relationship between human and non-human artefacts (Lim, 2020). Spatially, the malleability of this assemblage can help individuals retrieve a lost sense of place and alternative authenticity beyond ubiquitous media platforms (Jorge, 2019; Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016) and shatter the limitations of activism in territories, realities, and singular platforms for global activists (Lim, 2020). Hence by utilising dis/connection assemblage, this article contributes to expanding the scope of Lim's (2020) digital dis/connection repertoire to include migrants undergoing political turmoil and border and boundary studies.

4. The UK–Hong Kong–China context

The BN(O) context produces an interesting case study. The BN(O) visa enables Hong Kong citizens to study, reside, and work in the UK for two and a half or five years and apply for unrestricted permission to settle in the UK after five years of residence (Lewis, 2024), which has become a unique exemption in the context of the post-Brexit era and the Conservative government's tough words on immigration control (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022). However, BN(O) identification, nominally denoting nationality status, remains an immigration visa. For example, BN(O) migrants are normally not eligible for the vast majority of public welfare (Home Office, 2021). Further, BN(O)s and their dependents have access to British public schooling (Department for Education, 2022) but are classified as international students in universities who need to pay higher tuition fees (Loi, 2023).

The "5+1" visa scheme has prompted the Chinese and Hong Kong governments to stop recognising the BN(O) passport as proof of identity and travel within China. Hong Kong citizens are restricted from using ID cards or Hong Kong passports for entry and exit into mainland China (Chen & Zhao, 2021). Moreover, to limit the flow of assets, the Hong Kong government prohibits BN(O) migrants from withdrawing funds from the Mandatory Provident Fund, a pension savings scheme in Hong Kong, on immigration grounds ("Hong Kongers who have fled," 2023).

As Dahinden et al. (2020) note, borderwork reproduces systemic unequal governance in "legal, infrastructural and spatial terms" (p. 513); this article argues that the identity and identity politics of BN(O) migrants provide an ambiguous otherness discourse construction that represents images of orientalised and westernised "Others" in dual territorial and societal arenas. The British government's historical justification and incomplete citizenship re-activation redraw the symbolic and social boundary over these Chinese BN(O) migrants, while Chinese authorities legitimise the strategies of excluding this group to counter their threat to the boundary-making of "the political community of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204) in Hong Kong. Granted, these border-and-boundary regimes have substantial impacts on this group's boundary work; however, we seek to explore whether their digital practices are subservient to or challenge the normative definitions of us and them by both sovereign countries.

5. Hong Kong People's Politicised Identity and Digital Media (Non) Use

Following the handover, the authoritarian Chinese Communist regime's growing encroachment on Hong Kong's autonomy fuelled re-Chineseisation anxiety, stimulated localism, and fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment. It even revived nostalgic imagery of British colonial rule (Adorjan et al., 2021). Alongside the Anti-ELABM, many Hong Kong citizens increasingly developed a stronger Hongkonger identity, lowering or excluding

their Chinese identity (Lee, 2023). Further, the emerging Hong Kong diaspora has progressively promoted a distinct local Hong Kong identity and shunned their Chinese one in contrast with other overseas Chinese communities (Shum, 2023).

Political discourse in Hong Kong society has affected individuals' digital dis/connection. In the context of the increasingly polarised political stances of the pro-establishment camp (i.e., blue ribbons) and the pro-democracy camp (i.e., yellow ribbons) since the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Song et al., 2023), Skoric et al. (2016) note that while social media can promote citizens' political participation, digital disconnections on social media can also enhance it in periods of political conflict (Zhu & Skoric, 2022). For instance, the Umbrella Movement participants politically appropriated social media with disconnecting practices such as passive engagement and selective expression (Chu & Yeo, 2020). In the post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong, unfriending on Facebook as a disconnecting practice can create a safe digital space for political expression, particularly for those marginalised in local politics, such as yellow ribbons (Zhu & Skoric, 2022). In order to circumvent the fear and surveillance induced by the National Security Law, democracy supporters and localists are more likely to engage in more active privacy management on Facebook to disconnect from unknown audiences or even from the platform (Mak et al., 2022).

Amidst Anti-ELABM, members of Hong Kong diaspora organisations and overseas activists employ public social media and private messaging platforms as a means of collective political mobilisation to foster connections among like-minded individuals and promote social campaigns, which inspires a sense of remote civic responsibility (Fong, 2022). At the micro-political level, Tang and Cheng (2022) elaborate that in the aftermath of the Anti-ELABM, pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong have persisted in their political resistance and constructed a pro-democracy identity through political consumption and digital activism in everyday life. However, whether Hong Kong citizens with new transitional social membership will sustain or alter everyday activism and their identities through digital dis/connection tactics remains inadequately researched. Studying their cross-platform digital dis/connection can contribute to a broader discussion of the role of digital media in one's boundary work that reconfigures self and collective in a transnational setting.

6. Methodology

6.1. Data Collection and Reflection

A set of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted. Fourteen interviewees were recruited by using snowball sampling between March and November 2023 from the primary author's four different social circles and four respondents' recommendations (see Table 1). This method can facilitate reaching this low-profile group and building internal trust (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The primary author self-identifies as a Hong Kong female resident and also left Hong Kong with this wave of migration. Despite relocating to the Netherlands due to her parents' not obtaining a BN(O) visa, similar mobility motivated her to conduct this study. We reflected that while being female may have enabled the interviewees to share their opinions more easily, close political positions and identities appeared to be more important in gaining the trust of this group.

Prior to the interviews, we reminded the respondents of the existence of the National Security Law and that it was unnecessary for them to disclose their involvement with social movements in Hong Kong, which was also beyond the scope of this study. We focused on their digital media practices after migration to the UK.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents.

Number	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	F	30	Postgraduate student, job searching
2	M	54	Gardener in the UK, former company owner in Hong Kong
3	F	51	Nurse in the UK, former social worker in Hong Kong
4	M	51	Handyman in the UK, insurance company executive in Hong Kong
5	F	55	Former civil servant in Hong Kong
6	M	50	Engineer in the UK, former senior engineer in Hong Kong
7	M	20	University student
8	M	45	Company owner in Hong Kong
9	M	23	University student
10	F	60	Former civil servant in Hong Kong
11	F	13	Junior school student in the UK
12	M	58	Banker in the UK
13	M	55	Banker in the UK
14	F	28	Accountant in the UK

As per the research ethics process of the research university in the Netherlands and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all interviewees went through an informed consent process. This indicated the purpose of the study and that their responses would be de-identified and referred to by a code. No further data beyond the interview transcripts, such as social network information or connection to Hong Kong nationals, was collected for this research. Their personal information would be stored securely at a Dutch university for 10 years without being sent to Hong Kong. We have requested the interviewees' permission to quote partially anonymised information. In addition, the 13-year-old respondent was interviewed with the consent of her guardian. All respondents are digitally literate in using at least two digital media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, in line with Hong Kong residents' high social media user share of 89.9% (Kemp, 2023).

The interviews lasted from 50 to 90 minutes and were held in Cantonese, the dominant daily language in Hong Kong (Fong, 2017). The interview questions centred on respondents' everyday life in the UK and Hong Kong, their experiences and perceptions of dis/connection in both places, and their digital media consumption. All the recordings were transcribed verbatim into Chinese transcripts by the native Cantonese-speaking primary author, some of which were translated into English by professional translators DeepL and Google Translate with light proofreading by the primary author for analysis. Another native English-speaking author pointed out some ambiguities in the translation. The recordings were subsequently erased.

6.2. Data Analysis

We coded the transcripts on Altas.ti 23, following the six steps of the thematic analysis indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006). In two stages, we interpreted and collated all the initial codes and categorised them into six sub-themes, ultimately refining three main themes around migrants' dis/connection experiences as the sections below show.

7. Findings

7.1. Articulating Identity in Disrupted Time

Upon migrating to the UK, most interviewees re-adjust their identity to organise their boundary work. Respondent 8, 45, a company owner contracting with the Hong Kong government for projects, says that he no longer updates Facebook after Anti-ELABM. He is concerned that his competitors will track his digital footprint and report that he has left Hong Kong since his industry regulations normally forbid executives to depart; otherwise, he would be fined by the Hong Kong government. Nevertheless, his political dissent towards the government has driven him to resettle in the UK, despite the potential threat of being tracked down by the Hong Kong Immigration Department:

> Even though I have a company in Hong Kong, I don't want to pay tax to such a government anymore. I would rather contribute to the UK. Although there is no welfare in the UK currently, at least I sponsor my child to study here, and we live happily here, right? Why should I stay in Hong Kong, where I would be arrested if I just looked at a policeman a bit longer? Now I keep telling people I'm British and not a Hongkonger. Of course, I don't look white, but I think I'm British. I'm living here, and I'll probably be here when I'm old, sick, and dead.

Respondent 8's comments indicate the impacts of the British and Hong Kong governments' bordering on his digital disconnection from his social network, given that both authorities legally require individuals to stay local. He actively engages in and resists defined border-and-boundary work by violating the Hong Kong industry regulations to remain in the UK. His choice not to update Facebook is conscious of the need to be low-profile and distant from Hong Kong politics. Additionally, Respondent 8 consciously perceives the racialised (white British community) and subaltern (no welfare) connotations of everyday bordering for migrants in the UK, notwithstanding his justification of British identity and a sense of belonging with the economic capital and right to stay.

Likewise, Respondent 5 (55, former Hong Kong civil servant) is "very guarded about social media" and hardly ever appears on social media platforms such as Facebook. She is concerned about the perils of information dissemination and interpersonal surveillance. Her inactivity has forged a long-term discreet and practical virtual self. When *Apple Daily*, the largest pro-democracy newspaper in Hong Kong, was abruptly shut down on the grounds of allegedly endangering national security (Davidson, 2021), Respondent 5 was prompted to respond. She published a post in remembrance of *Apple Daily* when it was shut down, her last Facebook post to date. Just this post made Respondent 5's friend worry about her taking a risk she would not normally take. This connection emerging after a long period of disconnection seems to demonstrate Respondent 5's act as an "activist citizen" (Isin, 2009):

> If I post something, I presuppose that everyone will see it. So what? Is this a crime? Oh, now I don't know if it's illegal, haha. Back then, I posted this; I felt I wanted to voice it, and it was done in a situation where I felt safe to do so.

While Respondent 5 jokingly describes the dangers of the Hong Kong government's national security work, it influences her boundaries on social media, as is clear in her emphasis on personal safety. She says she

would like to inform her friends about the post, despite the possible unfriending by some people. This solitary transgressive act on Facebook both connects her with like-minded friends and disconnects her from people who would unfollow her over her political position and expression. This form of digital dis/connection thus re-anchors interpersonal boundaries for her that are simultaneously safe, not over-informed, and actively self-revealing.

Respondents 8 and 5's proactive disconnection tactics on the timeline of social media also demonstrate the socio-political context of how a home country shapes the identity dissonance, distancing, and negotiation processes of marginal migrant groups (Simon & Behnjharachajarunandha, 2023). While digital technologies facilitate immediacy and co-occurrence of communication across borders, digital disconnection interrupts these temporalities and serves as a mediator for migrants to express self-motivation and locate identity, whether they detach from one or any social platform. Disconnection as a form of resistance, therefore, may break habitus (Isin, 2008) and foster new subjectivities and emotions in acts that define the self and the other.

7.2. Re-Negotiating Belonging in Obstructed Spaces

Kaun and Treré (2020) interpret a form of digital disconnection as everyday lifestyle politics, which is characterised by individualised politics and aims to mitigate the power of technology over the pace of real life and the state of mind and body. As the crossing of borders leads to a shift in living space, BN(O)s reconfigure the sense of belonging in reality through varying degrees of disconnection to the virtual world.

For Respondent 1 (30, postgraduate), she tends to relocate to a place of greater cultural attachment:

> When I was in Hong Kong, my friends thought I was rather British—I mean, my lifestyle. I don't feel attached to Hong Kong's superficial social culture. I've just been relatively comfortable being myself since I moved to the UK.

Respondent 1 compares Britain and Hong Kong culturally, later indicating that Hong Kong's social culture, characterised by overwhelming photo-taking and oversharing on social media, fails to represent her. In contrast, she appreciates British culture's focus on realistic interactions. The resettlement from Hong Kong to the UK through the BN(O) visa allowed Respondent 1 to gain a genuine sense of self and belonging. Her dis/connection with social media establishes a sociocultural boundary between the two places. The pursuit of authenticity in Western everyday life entails Respondent 1 re-scrutinising technology and her social ties. To prevent the detrimental effects of media on the human body, mind, and aesthetics, she takes a critical approach to engaging in social media consumption. She elaborates:

> I don't fancy seeing celebrities' overwhelmingly beautiful pictures [on Instagram]. They somehow affect people's aesthetics when they are so sensational. You know that's not the reality. I am very conscious of what information I want to take, especially when I have to stay alone overseas.

Respondent 10 (60, former Hong Kong civil servant) however, has a blurred understanding of belonging. She only watches court news related to social movement trials in Hong Kong and a channel created by a former Hong Kong news team documenting the lives of immigrants on YouTube, while never following the

entertainment life in Hong Kong and the UK. She recognises that Hong Kong is no longer her place after 2019, yet neither is the UK. Such selective and distant socio-political dis/connection with Hong Kong online has increasingly transformed her sense of belonging. She now sees herself as living with more of a cosmopolitan mindset:

> I think Hong Kong has become less of a home as I used to know it, and I don't want to see the current Hong Kong as a home anymore. Ever since I migrated, I don't feel like the UK is my home either. It is a place where I live, and I have to work hard to get to know it or to get its nationality. There is a sense of belonging when it comes to home. I sometimes have the feeling that no matter how hard I try, I can't make this place my home. So, broadly speaking, I would say that I have a strong feeling of sojourning in this global village.

BN(O)s' situated disconnection reflects their nuanced awareness of belonging and lifestyle in transnational placemaking, such as Respondent 1's references to conspicuous aesthetics on social media and media intake concern. Respondent 1 marks the boundary between reality and digital engagement in ways similar to digital detox approaches, that is, periodic disconnection from digital media to regulate the pace of reality. It mirrors the individual responsibility discourses of pursuing a self-optimised lifestyle, regaining control over the space and time occupied by media, and advancing mental and physical well-being (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Moreover, Respondent 10's digital media practice in a liminal space represents the indeterminate sentimental boundary and agency in refusing to fully integrate and alienate oneself from the host and home countries. Notably, it is also empowered and constrained by the regimes' projects of border governance. Although digital technologies can shorten the distance of information transmission and facilitate borderless integration, the bounded barrier of digital disconnection between BN(O)s and their hometown reimagines and negotiates migrants' understandings of multiple spatial connections and statuses of everyday life.

7.3. Managing Relationships With Contextual Resilience

The National Security Law arguably constructs a discourse of state political borderwork and classed boundary work which intensifies the antagonism of political positions between pro-establishment and pro-democracy in Hong Kong society. In this context, it entails migrants managing incompatible relationships more flexibly.

The technological affordances provide mechanisms for the permissibility or constraint of objects to authorise the behaviour of subjects (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). In this sense, leveraging the visible and invisible affordances of technology helps fine-tune the management of emotions and privacy. Respondent 2 often follows the political dynamics of Hong Kong and China on Facebook, while his "quirk" is that he mutes news videos that affect his mood, such as Yeung Yun-hung's (Hong Kong's former Secretary for Education) views on film censorship in Hong Kong, and only watches subtitles. The Facebook mute function design therefore permits Respondent 2 to detach his political emotions while connecting with topicality in both locations.

Another example is Respondent 4 (51, insurance company executive in Hong Kong), who safeguards his privacy through the geolocation setting. He has two mobile phones that are respectively equipped with UK and Hong Kong SIM cards. The UK number is mainly used for contacting family in Hong Kong and people in the UK, whereas the phone bearing the Hong Kong number is installed with WeChat, a mainstream mainland

Chinese social platform, which is exclusively used for contacting his insurance clients in China. He concedes, "I won't install WeChat on my UK phone. It's undoubtedly under China's surveillance; you don't even need to wonder about it [WeChat's surveillance]." Respondent 4 suggests here that WeChat is the incarnation of power that extends the Chinese government's control over borders to other territories. His technological tactics that both traverse and manage (social) network boundaries act to resolve both his political expressions and professional needs.

Respondent 3 (51, former government social worker) re-weighs the importance of relationships after relocation to the UK. She exclusively uses WhatsApp to make calls rather than texting to connect with her friends in Hong Kong due to political concerns. Her perspectives on democracy caused her to strategise about how best to reconnect with peers who hold a contrary political position and partially circumvent their opinions:

> I think good friends are forever, and they think so too. I may not understand them sometimes because I'm not in their context anymore…but what we social workers are best at is listening. Friends won't stop talking to you just because you don't understand them. The reason I left Hong Kong is because there is no justice. But she [a pro-government friend] doesn't think that way. Then I take it [politics] a bit lighter. I try to see her other merits. Except for her political stance, she's a very nice person. To me, she must also have compromised something. Not just me to her.

Apart from outright or gradual disconnection, Respondent 5 (55, former Hong Kong civil servant) values the function of boundary rules. Facing siblings and friends with opposite political opinions, she underscores respect, as "everyone has a different growth trajectory. You always have other incompatible things." She clarifies, "I don't necessarily discuss politics in a baking group on WhatsApp. It is basic respect. My bottom line is that any group should have some common goals and rules. I will follow them."

These migrants' relational disengagement suggests that digital disconnection is not inevitably a complete refusal or resistance to relationships but rather an intentional exclusion from certain things such as political ideas, behaviours, and inconsistent rules. Disengagement is multi-layered, through which people may step back from "certain normative spaces and forms of sociality and behaviour" (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019, p. 906). Furthermore, digital dis/connection is not one-way and monolithic, which may channel the reconnection or drift apart for both parties in a constant engagement. In this regard, digital dis/connection acts as "a continuum of motivations," bridging online and offline environments through technological negotiation (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), which ultimately affects their transnational social networking across host and home countries. That is, digital disconnection enables migrants to differentiate and regulate the intensity and depth of connections contextually. However, these cases also show that individual digital disconnections are also under surveillance by power, which resonates with the characterisation that digital platforms do not necessarily lead to equal cross-border connections for migrants but may aid top-down suppression (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024).

8. Conclusion

This article examines the mediated boundary work of BN(O)s through the lens of dis/connection assemblage. On the one hand, BN(O)s have shaped boundaries around identity politics in terms of social positions, a

sense of belonging, and social relations through approaches such as low profile, sudden use of social media, selective access to media content, and abstinence on social media. Their boundary-making is not entirely segmented and completed at once, but instead consists of flexible situated practices. This answers the first research question. On the other hand, the BN(O) visa is a transitional immigration status to settlement, intertwined with partial deprivation of civil rights, political controversy, and the legacy of colonial history. Reacting to the political projects of belonging woven by the borderwork of the UK, Hong Kong, and China, BN(O)s' boundary work demonstrates that digital disconnection can be politicised as micro-resistance and naturalised as an everyday practice of state–individual interactions. By leveraging digital disconnection's fracture of connected space-time and resilient management of social relationships, BN(O)s attain an agentic governance of the self, which thus challenges, adapts to, or synergises with the institutional governance of politics of belonging. It answers the second research question. Overall, this article illustrates that the synergy of border-and-boundary work towards non-Western migrants contributes to expanding on the "vernacularised transformation" of border studies (Rumford, 2013), which suggests that "borders can be located 'away from the border' and dispersed throughout society" (p. 171), and sheds light on digital disconnection as a political practice of identity regulation.

Some limitations remain. We note that BN(O)s are subjected to state- and platform-led visible and invisible everyday policing when enacting digital disconnection. Whether this logic of visibility that emphasises being seen on digital platforms may engender individual vulnerability and precariousness (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022), even if this is only a temporary curation for migrants, and whether invisibility can create a power vacuum of micropolitical resistance, requires further reflection on the empowerment of digital disconnection. In this sense, we acknowledge that there are limits to the agency of digital disconnection. Although Lim (2020) suggests that the dis/connection assemblage provides a channel for people travelling across "spaces of appearance and spaces of disappearance" (p. 624), thereby sustaining the potential for micro-level political resistance, to what extent can an individual's digital dis/connection implement one's free will and be perceived as active political participation (Casemajor et al., 2015), as the surveillance culture is increasingly normalised by sovereign states and commercial platforms? This seems to signal that digital technologies bring solidarity while extending realities of unequal landscapes such as individual differences in media literacy (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024). In the case of the BN(O) visa, migrants' mediated practices are politically complicated by the intersection of border and boundary work. With the increase of BN(O)s in the UK, digital disconnection may be shaping the diaspora's new political discourse and (sub) socio-culture in response to more hegemonic border narratives that are legitimised by sovereign states. Whether disconnection will be passive, or an active radical political refusal, requires us to rethink the relationship between political engagement and digital technologies. Therefore, while BN(O)s are pro-democracy and digitally literate in this article, future research should consider those with diverse political alignments, media literacy, gender, and sexuality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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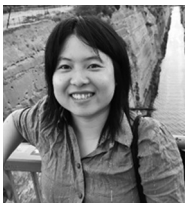
About the Authors



Jade Jiewen Deng was a research master student in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam and is currently a PhD student in the Department of Communication at University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests focus on everyday media representation of migrants and citizens, particularly in the Hong Kong–China context, political discourse, and social justice applied to technology.

Jason Pridmore is an associate professor in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Jason coordinates the SEISMEC project, focused on human-centric industry, and the COALESCE project, focused on the development of the European Competence Centre for Science Communication. His research focus for both projects and beyond is on effective understandings and communication on technology, looking at how digitalisation has altered our everyday life experiences.