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"And Only the Internet Remains…": Social Media's Role in Building Social Capital Among Migrant Students

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of students in Poland, comparing internal and international student migrants in how they form and maintain different types of social capital, including the development of trust, the maintenance of ties with their communities of origin, and the establishment of new relationships within the host society. Based on in-depth individual interviews, the study shows that strategies for maintaining transnational connections and forming local networks vary considerably across groups. The findings highlight the influence of contextual factors, such as the character of the diaspora, patterns of social media use, and proficiency in the host-country language on the ways digital practices support or hinder social capital formation. Across all groups, respondents expressed distrust toward strangers online and caution regarding new acquaintances and information encountered on digital platforms. Although participation in online groups provides a sense of community, the relationships formed within them tend to be superficial, marked by limited trust and a tendency to remain within migrant circles, which restricts the development of bridging networks with the host community. While asynchronous communication can create a temporary sense of closeness, sustaining such relationships requires active engagement and maintaining contact beyond online platforms. At the same time, ties that endured despite distance and time were often accorded particularly high value, with their ability to survive digital mediation viewed as evidence of their strength.

Keywords

educational migration; internal migration; Poland; social capital; social media; students

1. Introduction

Social media play an increasingly important role in the lives of young people, although digital habits vary by age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Kemp, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2024). At the same time, educational migration is a growing phenomenon in Europe and Poland, where international students comprised over 8% of the student population in 2023, mainly from Ukraine (45%) and Belarus (12%; OPI-PIB, 2025), while internal mobility among Polish students is also substantial (Jończy, 2022). A review of the literature reveals that educational migration remains relatively under-researched in the European context, despite its distinct characteristics in the region (Brooks et al., 2024). Most studies focus on psychological outcomes, especially intercultural adaptation (Zhou & Yin, 2024). The role of social media in shaping different forms of social capital among migrants has received little attention, and comparative analyses of internal and international migrants in this regard are scant. Comparing internal and international students is essential because these groups experience distinct challenges in forming and maintaining social relationships. By analysing these perspectives, the study can identify both universal and context-specific mechanisms through which social media use shapes bonding and bridging social capital. This article addresses these research gaps by comparing the experiences of internal and international student migrants in Poland with particular attention to how they form and maintain social relationships in virtual spaces.

The article examines the role of social media in generating and maintaining various forms of social capital, including the development of trust, the maintenance of ties with the community of origin, and the creation of new connections within the host society. It also explores changes in virtual communication and information-seeking practices over the course of the migration experience, with a particular focus on their effects on both bridging and bonding social capital. These considerations will lead to addressing the central research question: What are the implications of maintaining social media connections with members of the host society, the community of origin, and other international students for the social capital of different groups of migrants? This analysis clarifies how social media practices influence the formation of social capital among different groups of student migrants and offers implications for universities and support organisations.

2. Literature Review

Both the concept of social media and that of social capital lack universally accepted definitions and remain subjects of ongoing discussion and evolution. Scholars rarely agree on a single definition of social media, focusing instead on its functions and uses. Based on their review, Kapoor et al. (2017, p. 536) suggest defining social media as:

> Various user-driven platforms that facilitate diffusion of compelling content, dialogue creation, and communication to a broader audience. It is essentially a digital space created by the people and for the people, and provides an environment that is conducive for interactions and networking to occur at different levels.

Similarly, social capital's analytical utility is widely debated (Arrow, 2000; Döner, 2023). The term was first explored by Hanifan (1916), Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000), and Putnam et al. (1993). Since then, it has been defined and categorised in diverse and evolving ways (Burt, 2005; Field, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Portes, 2000; Putnam & Romney Garrett, 2020; Ryan et al., 2015). While the role of

social media in shaping migrants' social relationships and networks has been widely studied (Akter et al., 2024; Wen & Wen, 2020), research focusing specifically on educational migrants remains relatively new and rapidly growing (Zhou & Yin, 2024). Classical conceptualisations of social capital have also been applied to studies of social relationships and networks formed through social media. Analyses based on these frameworks have helped identify characteristics specific to the digital environment, including those relevant to migrating students. Given the broad scope of research on social capital, the following analysis will focus exclusively on studies examining the impact of social media on the social capital of international students.

International students inhabit transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000), sustaining ties offline and online across multiple countries (Gomes et al., 2014). Such connections are the form of the multidirectional linkages highlighted in transnationalism theory (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), spanning students' home countries, host countries, and the countries of origin of other foreign students. They also exemplify networked individualism, that is, digitally mediated, dispersed relationships. Their social capital no longer stems from stable group membership but from the ability to dynamically manage heterogeneous social networks (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004). As a result, they may develop maintained social capital, defined as the capacity to preserve valuable social ties despite life changes (Ellison et al., 2007). This resource is crucial for adapting to new environments while sustaining previous relationships. Different types of ties play different roles in new cultural contexts. Strong ties, such as international and family ties, contribute to bonding social capital and weak ties, such as local contacts, that support bridging social capital, both influence intercultural adaptation. Local networks foster bridging social capital by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and information, especially between domestic and international students (Chang et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2022). In contrast, international networks and ties to family and friends in the country of origin support bonding social capital by providing emotional support and a sense of belonging (Gomes et al., 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2017).

Social media transform how migrants maintain ties with their countries of origin, construct transnational identities, and enact multidimensional belonging (Aziz, 2024; Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012). They are also essential in fostering sojourners' acculturation experience and coping strategies (Pang & Wang, 2020). A systematic review of the literature confirms that social media support student migrants' acculturation by facilitating both the maintenance of ties with the home country and the development of new relationships in the host society (Pang & Wang, 2020). Social media thus become part of a transnational migratory habitus (Podgórska, 2021). They also offer opportunities for support and social connection even when offline interactions are limited (Cao et al., 2024). Social media can significantly expand migrants' networks beyond close contacts and strong ties (Beech, 2015), increasing access to diverse resources and information (Qi et al., 2022; Wong & Liu, 2024). This is especially important in culturally closed societies or when face-to-face interaction is restricted (Cao et al., 2024). In such contexts, social media provide an alternative space for building ties and exchanging information, thus fostering the development of social capital, particularly bridging capital.

Social media and the social capital built through them are considered key components of the migration infrastructure (Jayadeva, 2024), which facilitates student mobility. Their use can extend prospective students' networks beyond close contacts, potentially enabling connections with latent ties or previously unknown individuals who possess information about the destination or migration logistics (Jayadeva, 2020). An important role in fulfilling informational needs is played not only by those already abroad but also by

prospective migrants who create internal support networks for themselves and other applicants (Jayadeva, 2024). Candidates and students use social media to build support networks based on shared experiences rather than pre-existing close relationships. Even after beginning their studies, a key factor in selecting individuals to connect with online, and from whom to seek support, is their ability to understand the specific challenges related to academic life and cultural adaptation (Baines et al., 2022).

During their stay in the host country, immigrants' online networks typically mirror existing offline friendships and rarely result in new ties, despite their potential to foster bridging or latent ties, that is, technically accessible but inactive connections (Hendrickson et al., 2017). While social media can support the formation of cross-cultural networks (Cao et al., 2024), it may also reinforce co-national clustering, hinder integration, and contribute to the formation of cultural silos (Hendrickson et al., 2017; Lim & Pham, 2016). Social media use and acculturation influence each other bidirectionally. Qi et al. (2022) show that students' acculturation strategies shape their platform choices, while use of host-country platforms fosters new ties with local students (Dong et al., 2023).

In summary, social capital refers to networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and access to resources, whereas social media function as a digital tool that may influence, both positively and negatively, the interaction and exchange processes essential for its formation. However, their impact is context-dependent, and the mechanisms through which online interactions shape these forms of capital among diverse groups of student migrants remain insufficiently understood. This study explored these mechanisms by comparing how internal and international student migrants in Poland use social media to build and maintain social capital, with particular attention to group-specific and contextual differences.

3. Theoretical Framework

The research project discussed in this article is situated within the emerging field of digital migration studies (Leurs & Smets, 2018), adopting a bottom-up perspective focused on migrants' everyday digital practices. This approach emphasises not only the use of digital tools but, more importantly, how they facilitate adaptation to a new environment and the (re)construction of identity in a changing world. Technologies are seen as both shaping and being shaped by social realities (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018). In this study, this approach was applied to interpret how students' use of social media influenced the building and development of networks, bonds, and trust. The research focuses on the role of social media, defined, following Akter et al. (2024), as communication platforms that enable users to create personal profiles, establish lists of online connections, and browse and navigate both their own and others' networks.

In this article, social capital is understood as networks, norms, and trust that individuals use to achieve goals. It typically takes two main forms: bonding social capital, which involves strong ties within relatively homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, referring to weaker ties connecting diverse groups (Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam (2000), bridging capital is better for linking to external assets. This makes it particularly relevant for students facing a new and uncertain social situation at the outset of an important life stage abroad, often in unfamiliar cultural and social contexts. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is particularly relevant for analysing migrants' online activity, as social media are used both to maintain ties with the community of origin and to build new transnational connections with locals and other international students. This study assumes that bonding and bridging capital are not

mutually exclusive; individuals may hold both or neither. Table 1 presents the operationalisation of bonding and bridging social capital, grounded in Putnam's framework, applied in this study.

Table 1. Operationalisation of bonding and bridging social capital.

Bridging social capital	Bonding social capital
Networks	
Membership in online communities/groups composed of members of the host society or related to the place of study;	Membership in online communities/groups composed of members of the origin community or related to the place of origin;
Actively and positively engaging (posting, commenting) in such communities;	Actively and positively engaging (posting, commenting) in such communities;
Including host society members among online friends/followers;	Including origin community members among online friends/followers;
Searching in online groups for information on local events or issues;	Searching online groups for information on events occurring in the country or community of origin.
Requesting assistance in everyday matters from host society members.	
Ties	
Maintaining close relationships with host society members;	Maintaining close relationships with members of the origin community;
Expressing the desire to establish close relationships with host society members in the future;	Expressing the desire to sustain such relationships in the future (both online and offline);
Regular online conversations, commenting on posts/photos of host society contacts;	Regular online conversations, commenting on posts/photos of origin community contacts;
Declaring willingness to seek help from host society members in difficult life situations;	Declaring willingness to seek help from members of the origin community in difficult life situations.
Transferring online relations with host society members into offline life.	
Trust	
Declaring that online acquaintances from the host society are trustworthy;	Declaring that online acquaintances from the origin community are trustworthy.
Recommending online groups related to the host community as reliable sources of information.	

4. Methodology and Research Design

As part of the project, 22 in-depth individual interviews were conducted with first-year students enrolled in full-time bachelor's and master's programmes at various universities in Warsaw: 11 with internal migrants (Polish citizens born in Poland, residing in Warsaw no earlier than 1 September 2022, which marked the beginning of the project's first stage) and 11 with international students (non-Polish citizens born outside Poland, residing in Poland as of 1 September 2022 at the earliest). This temporal threshold was established to exclude individuals who had moved to Warsaw for reasons other than pursuing education. The categorisation draws on the UNESCO definition of internationally mobile students, which refers to individuals who have physically crossed an international border to pursue education in a country other than

that in which they obtained their upper-secondary or prior education (UNESCO, n.d.). Inclusion criteria specified that eligible participants were first-year students enrolled in full-time programmes at universities in Warsaw who declared daily use of social media. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals enrolled solely in short-term language or exchange programmes, as well as those who had relocated to Warsaw before September 2022. Internal migrants' statements were coded as PLX, and international migrants' statements as FOX, with X indicating the respondent's number. The international participants came from the following countries: Ukraine (3), Belarus (2), and one each from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Tunisia, Singapore, China, and Jordan. The students were enrolled in degree programmes including law, biomedical engineering, geodesy and cartography, nursing, management, social policy, computer science, and biotechnology. Among Polish respondents, the majority were women, consistent with the gender structure of the student population in Poland. All were aged 18–21, corresponding to the typical age of undergraduate students. Among international respondents, women also constituted a slight majority, but the group was more diverse in terms of age (18–32), illustrating the varied educational trajectories and experiences of migrant students. All respondents from Ukraine and Belarus were enrolled in Polish-language programmes and interviewed in Polish. Participants from other countries studied in English-language programmes, in which foreign students predominated, and were interviewed in English due to insufficient proficiency in Polish. Several of these participants also stated that they did not intend to learn Polish, citing its perceived difficulty. The sample was purposively selected to achieve thematic saturation and to ensure diversity in country of origin and field of study, while representing the typical dominance of Belarusian and Ukrainian students in the Polish context. This approach captured a range of experiences, from students in Polish-taught programmes to those in English-language programmes for international students, enabling the examination of how social media use intersects with linguistic, cultural, and institutional factors.

Respondents were recruited via the author's personal networks and through announcements posted on social media platforms related to studying in Warsaw. Interviews typically lasted slightly over one hour, ranging from 30 minutes to more than two hours, with those conducted with international respondents generally being longer due to their greater willingness to provide detailed and comprehensive accounts of their experiences. None of the participants who began an interview withdrew during the process, although there were instances where individuals agreed to take part but did not attend the scheduled meeting. The researcher drew on her personal experience studying abroad and teaching international students, to create a situation of empathetic neutrality (Kim et al., 2009) and to encourage participants to share both positive and negative experiences. All respondents who completed an interview received shopping voucher in appreciation of their time and contribution. They were informed in advance that this voucher would be provided regardless of whether interview was completed. During the sessions, participants responded to questions from an interview guide developed by the researcher and were encouraged to elaborate freely on their reflections.

Using deductive thematic coding based on the operationalisation of bonding and bridging social capital, respondents' statements were assigned to the subthemes of networks, ties, and trust. The coding proceeded in several stages: transcripts were first read in full to identify initial patterns, after which relevant segments were coded into the subthemes, and recurrent motifs and cross-case variations were compared to derive thematic patterns. To ensure consistency between the theoretical framework and the empirical material, the interview guide was organised around thematic blocks corresponding to the operationalisation (Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic organisation of interview questions.

Block	Examples of guiding questions
Respondent information	Age, field of study, social media apps used
Changes in social media usage after arriving in Warsaw	With whom participants communicate online; preference for online vs. offline communication
Information seeking	About studies in Warsaw and conditions in the place of origin (sources, frequency, topics of interest)
Networks	Membership in online groups; size and composition of virtual friends; changes in online and offline friendships after starting university
Ties	Willingness to maintain old and form new relationships; forms, strength, and quality of online and offline ties with various groups
Trust	Levels of trust in different categories of people online and offline; changes in trust after starting university

The project received approval from the University of Warsaw Rector's Committee for the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants. All participants voluntarily provided written informed consent to participate in the study and to have their interviews recorded. They were assured that they could withdraw from the interview at any point without forfeiting their voucher. All data were analysed in an anonymised form, in line with established ethical research standards.

5. Results

5.1. Changes in Social Media Usage After Arriving for Studies

Social media are a crucial element of the migration experience, both for internal and international migrants. Almost all respondents used them during the preparation stage for departure. If an individual had acquaintances at the destination, both internal and international migrants considered them the first and most reliable source of information, through both direct and online contacts. At the same time, international migrants, whose social networks in the host country were significantly more limited, more often reported searching for both information and support on social media and rated these sources as the most reliable. The more intensive the direct contacts migrants had with other migrants and representatives of the host community, the more critically they perceived the reliability of information and the quality and significance of online communication. Respondents from the internal migrant group were particularly critical of social media, reflecting their prior familiarity with the local context and the availability of direct, in-person sources of information:

> From the very beginning, they didn't seem very credible. Why? Because the information was either exaggerated or idealised. From the start, it looked too polished, too perfect to be true. (PL5)

Only one participant, who had no acquaintances in Warsaw before starting studies, expressed a different perspective.

Respondents also emphasised the importance and credibility of official student groups created by university administration or student government on Facebook:

> If you find the right Facebook groups made specifically for students by UW students, they are the most valuable communities. The reliability of information there is over 90%. I would definitely recommend it. (PL9)

For both internal and international migrants, social media become most important during the initial stage after migration, as they simultaneously enter a new phase of life, form new connections, and maintain ties with their communities of origin. In this way, these platforms serve as a space where bridging and bonding social capital intersect, leading most respondents to spend more time online than before, using them to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact:

> Generally speaking, since I came to Poland, I spend more time online because I still don't know many people here, so I'm mostly online. (FO9)

> I have to admit that before coming to Warsaw, I didn't spend as much time on Messenger as I do now....Before, I could meet people in person, but now that's not really possible. (PL3)

Respondents from both internal and international migrant groups reported shifting from text messaging to audio and video communication (e.g., video calls, voice messages, Instagram or TikTok stories) after leaving their place of origin. As one participant explained:

> It was a tough period because I moved and was far away from all my friends and family. I mainly communicated via Messenger video calls to vent, share how things were going here, and exchange experiences about the city. (FO8)

Another added:

> Now I use the internet more for calls, mainly talking to people via Telegram or WhatsApp. I just have video calls with them to hear voices from home. When I lived in Singapore, I didn't do this often. I just sent SMS like, "hey, can we meet this afternoon or evening," and then we met in person. (FO7)

This enabled them to maintain bonding social capital by staying connected with their communities of origin, while simultaneously sharing experiences that reinforced a sense of togetherness despite the distance.

For some international migrants, arriving in the host country meant gaining access to the internet or starting to use new applications. This resulted from lack of access in their home country (China), security concerns (Belarus), or the low popularity of these tools (Ukraine):

> In Congo, using the internet is limited....And it's very expensive....Here, the internet is very cheap. Moreover, there are many Wi-Fi options, for example, free access can be found in the city centre. In Congo, that's rare. (FO4)

I didn't have Facebook before. Actually, I had an account but didn't use it for 10 years. When I arrived in Warsaw, I reinstalled the app. Now I use Facebook to check events in Warsaw and international events. When I look for housing or something else, I usually do it there. People also often add each other as friends, so it's a big change. (FO9)

At the same time, respondents kept the apps they had used before moving. This resulted in a diversification of the communication tools and formats, which they used with different categories of people, depending on age, the closeness of the relationship, and whether the contacts belonged to the country-of-origin or host community:

When I need to contact friends from my field of study, I use Messenger. But when I need to contact colleagues from my dorm group [mainly from Belarus and Ukraine], we use Telegram. In the East, people use Facebook and Messenger less, and prefer Telegram. With friends from the East, I use Telegram, and with Poles, Messenger....Now I have to communicate somehow with the Polish community, and they prefer Facebook and Messenger, so I use the most effective tools. (FO10)

5.2. Maintaining Ties With the Community of Origin

Social media help participants maintain connections with their communities of origin, though this varies across migrant groups. All international migrants participating in the study reported maintaining close relationships with friends from their country of origin and demonstrated a high level of interest in events occurring there:

Yes, I am interested in that, so I try to find out what is happening in the country using the internet. Additionally, I talk with friends from there who tell me about the economic, political, and social situation, about what has been happening since I left. They tell me everything, and sometimes I also watch videos on YouTube because I always try to stay informed. (FO5)

All Ukrainian respondents, who arrived in Poland after the outbreak of the war, reported intensive online monitoring of events in their hometowns. They frequently used social media and messaging apps, including local Telegram groups, to stay informed and maintain ties with family, friends, and their former communities. As one participant explained:

First thing after I wake up, I think it's the same for most people from Ukraine, I check whether everything is okay in my city, whether nothing happened overnight, for example, any missile attacks. (FO1)

The outbreak of war influenced both the ways this group of respondents used social media and their perception of its role in daily life, strengthening their sense of connection to their community of origin.

Among internal migrants, attitudes toward maintaining ties with their communities of origin varied. Some emphasised the importance of staying connected and regularly following local events through social media; others treated their hometown as less central after starting a new life stage in Warsaw; still others sought a balance between old and new relationships. These differences may stem, among other factors, from the relatively greater ease of forming new connections in the home country, a condition that differs markedly from the experience of international migrants.

Respondents who maintain the closest ties with their origin communities tend to be those who do not plan to stay in Warsaw after their studies, although this does not necessarily mean they intend to return permanently to their hometowns. For them, the hometown remains a symbolic base and point of reference they do not want to lose contact with, and social media greatly facilitate this:

> I am also interested in what is happening in my city. I usually follow Facebook to see what's going on there and track various institutional pages. Most of the information about my hometown I obtain online. (PL1)

The experiences of respondents from the internal migrant group indicate that social media can serve as an important tool for maintaining bonding social capital, provided that the migrant personally values their ties to the origin community and actively seeks to sustain or develop these relationships.

Analysis of the respondents' statements leads to the conclusion that, after leaving their place of origin, both international and internal migrants experience a weakening of ties with those they have left behind. Social media use slows but doesn't halt this process; the possibility of maintaining relationships online, especially passively, such as through liking posts, often represents the last thread connecting migrants to their contacts in the origin community:

> Only the internet remains to keep these connections from fading. (FO2)

> Without the internet, these contacts would have already been lost. (PL3)

Respondents emphasised that relationships that have withstood the test of time and distance are now particularly valuable to them. Social media constitute one of the most important tools not only for maintaining these ties but also for further developing and deepening them:

> There are people from my hometown with whom these bonds are extremely close [sic]. I would say these ties have become even stronger; we talk more now and message each other more often….Such relationships recently have not only survived but even strengthened. (FO3)

According to the respondents, social media enable mutual sharing of everyday life, which helps maintain bonds and fosters a sense of togetherness despite the physical distance:

> I use TikTok to record videos that I share with my friends. They also send me clips showing what is happening in our country, and I show them what the city looks like here. (FO6)

Interviewees emphasise the importance of active social media use (Pang, 2020), such as posting updates, photos, or comments as a way of signalling that one values a relationship and wishes to maintain it:

> I think I most often comment on posts by my friends from Tunisia because I spend more time checking on how they are doing….I try to see what is happening in my hometown. I comment on what they do, sometimes I write that I would like to do something with them, or that I miss them. I want to tell them I hope to meet them soon. (FO7)

I am their friend, so I have to comment. And when I post my photos, they have to comment. It's partly a matter of culture. (FO4)

Such activities often initiate further private conversations via social media, a pattern reported by both internal and international migrants. As one participant noted:

Instagram is a good tool to start a conversation with someone you haven't seen for a long time…you can respond specifically to a photo, write a private message, and avoid artificial small talk. (PL11)

Another added:

When I post a photo, friends always comment and like it, then we start talking.…Sometimes they also post photos, I comment, and then we talk because of that. (FO5)

Other respondents highlight that online communication is a convenient way to maintain relationships, as it allows them to stay in touch without the need to synchronise their daily schedules.

It's also convenient…because if my friend and I feel like sharing something cool at a given moment, we write detailed messages and wait for a reply. She might respond the next day, and that's normal for me because I know she's busy, and I usually reply when I'm on the bus or in class so as not to waste time. (PL7)

Some interviewees also note that if online communication occurs alongside other activities, it may negatively affect the quality of the relationship:

When we communicate online, the time dedicated to the conversation becomes somewhat diluted. I'm not fully focused on the people I'm communicating with because I'm often doing other things at the same time, and it's not the same level of connection as in face-to-face conversation. (FO3)

Respondents also said that online communication can be superficial and selective, potentially creating a false sense of maintained bonds and portraying an inaccurate image of both the migrant's situation and the people they remain in contact with:

But I see it as two sides of the same coin. On one hand, thanks to the internet, we can see each other, follow each other on Instagram, Telegram, Facebook. We see our shared photos, which strongly supports maintaining these relationships. We have virtual contact and know what's happening in each other's lives. But on the other hand, this virtual reality gives us a deceptive impression that we have a close connection. (FO3)

5.3. Building New Social Networks

Respondents report that social media mainly support existing relationships, while initiating new contacts is relatively infrequent. Migrants from outside Europe are the most open to forming new connections online, especially with other foreigners, whereas internal migrants and European international migrants rely less on

these platforms. This difference stems from linguistic and cultural barriers, which make online networks a key tool for social integration for non-European migrants:

> Building relationships here is not easy; people are reserved. That's why one has to rely on the internet. I am a member of the African community on Facebook and a church group for Africans. These groups provide valuable information and allow me to meet people like myself. In African groups in Poland, I find people from my country. I joined these groups because it was difficult to get information and meet my compatriots here. It was hard at first, so I had to join these groups. (FO5)

Online communication serves as a potential, though not always fully realised, entry point for deeper relationships, including those that may extend into the offline world. Foreign respondents expressed a desire to meet Poles; however, the language barrier remains a significant obstacle they struggle to overcome due to limited opportunities to practice Polish:

> I would really like to speak Polish; I am genuinely interested in the language, but I struggle with understanding and speaking. This is mainly because I don't have many Polish friends who could motivate me. (FO5)

Respondents reported seeking connections on social media, but primarily join groups composed of foreigners. This dynamic shifts when they begin to establish more direct contacts with Poles, with relationships transitioning into the online sphere:

> I usually meet people from Warsaw during events organised by the university or my work team. As I mentioned, social media can be distracting, so I prefer to meet people with similar interests or backgrounds. Sometimes my colleagues invite me to meet their friends. (FO8)

For migrants from outside Europe, online friendships serve as a remedy for loneliness, providing a sense of belonging and helping them find their place among "their own," people from countries distant from Poland, both culturally and especially linguistically:

> Being lonely is very, very hard. But we have the internet here, so I don't have to be lonely. (FO4)

> You all share the same struggle, meaning you don't speak Polish fluently. Then you have those people you can rely on to help each other because of this shared struggle [like, with], for example, feeling out of place. (FO7)

Foreign migrants from non-Eastern European countries with extensive virtual social networks noted the risk of an illusory sense of belonging to the immigrant community. For them, the internet is a tool for numerous but rather superficial virtual acquaintances. The ease and availability of online communication can also discourage transferring relationships into the offline world:

> Sometimes I try to talk to someone online and suggest meeting up, but often I hear: "I don't have time," "I'm busy," or someone simply avoids meeting. I feel that many people just don't want to meet. Sometimes you have no choice and must communicate online because face-to-face meetings may simply not happen. (FO4)

Respondents from non-European countries suggested that online acquaintances primarily serve as a source of social capital that connects them with other foreigners. While these relationships can be superficial and rarely extend beyond the online sphere, they remain very important for those with limited opportunities to establish other types of contacts.

In contrast, for internal migrants and individuals from Eastern Europe, membership in online groups was mainly pragmatic, limited to searching for housing, employment, or information about their studies. They emphasised that due to relatively small cultural differences, living in Poland does not pose significant organisational challenges. For them, the positive role social media play in acquiring basic cultural competencies and coping with everyday situations is considerably less pronounced than for migrants from Africa and Asia:

> I use social media to communicate with people from my field of study, to find out information related to classes, exam dates, how courses will be conducted, or other important matters….Now I have to interact somehow with the Polish community, and Poles prefer Facebook and Messenger, so I use the most effective tools available. (FO10)

> We have a Facebook group for our studies; everyone is there and essential information is shared, so it forced me to come back to Facebook because it's currently impossible to function without it. (PL7)

Students from Poland and Eastern Europe generally find it easy to form real-life friendships and report little interest in seeking new acquaintances through social media. They are also generally uninterested in local online groups related to, for example, the neighbourhood where they live during their studies, as they view their stay in these places as temporary. At the same time, they acknowledge that developing virtual networks may weaken direct relationships, although such online connections could still prove useful or beneficial in the future:

> Sooner or later, these acquaintances may become necessary. People help us a lot. (F02)

> Many students approach contacts as investments for the future, so we also add each other as friends. (PL7)

Internal migrants also join student groups on social media out of a fear of missing out on important events, information about which can primarily be obtained through participation in online communities, or from the difficulty of integrating in real life into groups that have already formed or bonded earlier. At the same time, these platforms can be a source of anxiety related to fears of rejection, social mismatch, or being uninformed:

> Yes, absolutely, I looked for a group for people from Management because it was a lesson learned from high school. When I started, I didn't know anyone and wasn't interested in contacting anyone….Over the summer, they got to know each other, and it was hard for me to break into the group. So, when I got into university, I immediately started looking for online groups, and I succeeded, which was great. It's very important to do such things. (PL7)

A distinctive feature of immigrants from Eastern Europe is their extensive intra-ethnic networks on social media, which are typical of their countries of origin:

> On Telegram, these are groups such as Belarusians in Poland or Belarusians in Warsaw. When it comes to matters related to Poland and studies, of course, Facebook is used, especially student groups like Best Biology Faculty. These are closed groups where students discuss exam sessions, tests, and lecturers....And on Telegram? Social chats, such as those for dormitory residents, used for general requests like asking for onions or events like parties, trips. (FO11)

Meanwhile, studies, work, and other forms of direct, face-to-face interaction remain the best means of integration with the host community:

> Based on my experience, I can say that the best opportunities to form friendships are in person, in the real world: meeting people at work, at university, or, for example, during social events, later in places like the library, or through mutual acquaintances. But, as I said, all of this involves forming friendships face to face. (FO1)

5.4. Trust

A critical attitude also appeared in respondents' assessments of the reliability of acquaintances met via social media and of the information obtained online. Participants across all groups reported adopting a presumption of distrust when using the internet, emphasising the need for caution in virtual relationships, especially with people unknown in real life:

> I don't trust people I meet online at all because, on the internet, anyone can be whoever they want, but in reality, they are always different. Many crimes are committed online because people trust too much. If I don't see or know the person, I cannot trust them. (FO11)

Almost all respondents stated that they had not personally experienced unpleasant situations that would negatively affect their trust levels, though many reported having heard about such incidents from acquaintances:

> I have heard many disturbing stories from my friends, particularly women, about their experiences meeting people online. I won't go into detail, but these often end in very unpleasant situations. (FO1)

The highest levels of trust, both in online relationships and in information obtained via the internet, were declared by non-European migrants, particularly those with the least developed offline social networks or support systems in their host country:

> Loneliness is hard, but the internet helps. Here in Warsaw, I don't have anyone, so when I have a problem, I look for help online. (FO4)

For some respondents, studying abroad became an opportunity to reassess the quality of their existing relationships, which was often interpreted in terms of trust toward people from their place of origin:

> I think that living here changed my approach to trust in some people from back home, because the moment I moved to Warsaw was a turning point in my life….And for that reason, among others, some of my relationships faded, as our ways of seeing life started to differ. (FO3)

At the same time, participants emphasised that maintaining long-distance online contact serves as a kind of trust test for those who remained in their home communities:

> Yes, I think this time in Warsaw really tested my earlier relationships…and if someone is still among my friends, it means the trust is still there. And if they're not, it simply means the trust didn't survive. (FO2)

Respondents also emphasised that their perceptions and evaluations of social media relationships, as well as the credibility of information acquired online, are shaped by the broader national context in which they currently reside. They noted that the general level and culture of trust in a host country significantly influence their experiences of online interactions, both with fellow migrants and with members of the host society:

> Well, to be honest, my level of trust in Poland is a bit lower compared to Denmark, because the general culture in Denmark is more trust-oriented than here. For example, the Facebook group for foreigners here in Warsaw is far more conflict-ridden and less friendly than the same kind of group in Denmark. They argue every day, just like that. It definitely affects my level of trust. (FO8)

> Where I come from, scams and scandals are an everyday thing, there's just too much of it all. (PL7)

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The study shows that the role of social media in developing and maintaining social capital among student migrants is complex and context-dependent. These effects vary in their impact on different dimensions of social capital, such as networks, ties, and trust, and manifest differently across various groups of individuals migrating for education. The findings presented in this article suggest that online social networks created by international students are highly diverse and often defy binary categorisation into local and transnational networks (Gomes et al., 2014).

Several contextual factors may influence the consequences of using social media as a tool for building or expanding social capital, including:

- Diaspora-related factors in the host country, particularly those involving individuals of similar age and migration experiences (e.g., the size of the diaspora, its activity level, forms of engagement, and openness to new members);
- Personal factors, such as the intensity of homesickness, the need to establish new relationships, the size and diversity of personal support networks, and future migration intentions;
- Patterns of social media use, including frequency of use, types of platforms employed (especially whether these overlap with or differ from those used by members of the host society), and whether engagement is active or passive;

- Language proficiency and ongoing learning motivation, encompassing both respondents' current command of foreign languages and their motivation to continue learning them, which is associated with their enrolment in study programmes conducted in different languages.

The analysis points to shared mechanisms across all groups in the use of social media for the development and maintenance of social capital. These platforms enable immigrants to maintain connections with their communities of origin (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2020), which are key resources from the perspective of bonding social capital. Particularly in the initial phase of migration, they constitute an important element of migration infrastructure (Jayadeva, 2020), facilitating the formation of new social networks while also enabling the maintenance of ties with the place of origin. They help migrants navigate both local and transnational forms of belonging and strengthen bonding as well as bridging social capital (Qi et al., 2022). Respondents' statements reveal their experience of a digital journey or digital border-crossing, adapting to new platforms and diverse information sources in the host country while maintaining resources from their country of origin (Chang & Gomes, 2017; Qi et al., 2022). It can therefore be argued that international students' use of the social media platforms commonly adopted by members of the host society fosters the formation of new ties with local students (Dong et al., 2023). However, the strength of this effect is limited. Research shows that to develop successful bridging capital, relationships must be transferred beyond the virtual sphere. Online communication alone rarely leads to the formation of strong ties. Another common feature among all groups of students studied was distrust toward strangers online and caution regarding new acquaintances and information circulated on social media. At the same time, ties that endured despite distance and time were often attributed a particularly high value, with their ability to "survive" digital mediation viewed as evidence of their strength. Finally, for some groups of migrants, the differentiation in communication tools depending on the target audience suggests that different types of social capital may be developed through using different online platforms.

Despite these similarities, the study reveals key differences between internal and international educational migrants, as well as among international migrants from Eastern Europe and from outside Europe. Internal migrants, like those from Eastern Europe, tend to use social media instrumentally and critically. Their greater familiarity with the local context facilitates offline network formation, reducing reliance on online communication for social support. At the same time, such interactions are particularly important for the bonding social capital of international migrants, given their limited alternative means of maintaining ties with their sending communities. They support what Ellison et al. (2007) refer to as maintained social capital. However, despite the frequent use of these platforms, ties with the place of origin tend to weaken over time. The ease and availability of asynchronous communication may create an illusion of closeness, though sustaining these relationships requires active engagement (e.g., commenting, reacting) and maintaining contact beyond social media.

For non-European migrants, language barriers hinder the formation of relationships with Poles both online and offline, limiting the potential of social media to generate bridging social capital. Although online groups provide a sense of community, the relationships formed through them tend to be superficial, characterised by lower trust and a tendency to close off within migrant groups, which hampers the development of bridging networks with the host community. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable among immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus, who use different media for interacting with co-nationals and with Poles: they tend to be active in platforms specific to their own communities, while remaining passive in those popular in the host country.

At the same time, students from Eastern Europe maintain strong online ties with their country of origin, even though in their everyday lives they frequently spend time with Poles and evaluate these contacts positively. However, there is a risk that online isolation may undermine the integrative effects of offline interactions, particularly in the workplace and at university.

The article's use of digital everyday life analysis as a methodological approach provides new insights into the specificities of online interactions among different groups of educational migrants, thereby contributing to the growing body of literature on the relationship between social media and social capital. However, this approach has its limitations, including the subjectivity of data interpretation, challenges in generalising results, and limited attention to the structural conditions of migration (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018), a small sample size, potential distortions arising from the war in Ukraine, and the exclusion of short-term migrants (e.g., Erasmus+ participants). It is also important to consider the dynamic nature of technological change, which may reshape how migrants use social media over time.

This article advances the understanding of social capital among student migrants by showing that bonding and bridging social capital often coexist and are dynamically shaped through everyday digital practices. The study highlights the importance of maintained social capital, showing how international students sustain ties with their home countries while adapting to new environments. At the same time, the findings indicate that students are aware of the limitations and risks of social media, whose role in building social capital appears limited and strongly context-dependent. Differences in their use across internal and international migrants, as well as between European and non-European students, underscore the importance of contextual factors such as diaspora engagement, language proficiency, and familiarity with the host society.

These findings suggest that integration policies and university support programmes should be tailored to the specific digital practices and linguistic profiles of different student groups. The results also point to the need for more differentiated approaches that take into account the specific communicative preferences of migrant students. Universities and student organisations may consider developing targeted mentoring and peer-support initiatives, offered both online (especially prior to arrival) and offline after enrolment, together with language and intercultural communication workshops tailored to non-European students. For Eastern European migrants, it is essential to recognise the integrative potential of intra-ethnic online networks, while also addressing the risks associated with remaining in closed digital communities. In this context, NGOs, both diaspora-oriented and intercultural, can play an important mediating role. Finally, the findings underscore the importance of media literacy education aimed at fostering critical awareness of information circulated on social media and encouraging more reflective, meaningful online interactions.

Future comparative studies across countries could reveal how local contexts shape social media use and the formation of social capital. Research on emerging digital platforms could clarify how shifts in digital practices influence the development of social capital. Another important question also concerns the extent to which the variations in platform use identified in this study affect the integration of other migrant groups beyond educational migrants.

Acknowledgments

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