Status Competition in the Digital Era: Degree Seeking, Public Credentialism, and Informal Counseling in Two Taiwanese Social Media Sites

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Abstract

Students with college degrees are likely to obtain satisfactory employment, but few studies examine how students assess the value of degrees when they are inadequate after universal higher education. Based on content analyses of 1,260 posts on a Dcard undergrad forum and 640 posts on a PTT senior high forum, which are the two most influential local social media sites in Taiwan, I investigate how students make sense of the value of degrees and how online platforms shape dominant narratives on choosing a degree. I argue that the value of a degree is congruently defined by the messages surrounding teenagers, which reassign, redefine, and place degrees in the existing status hierarchy. I call this phenomenon “public credentialism,” which is a collective status-building process through which individuals assign value to degrees through online narratives, social closure, and online argument styles. While the literature on college choices is dominated by quantitative rational-choice studies, digital ethnography sheds light on the meaning-making process and advances the discussion on relative value in credential theory.

Keywords: college choices, credential, higher education, digital ethnography

Word count: 7946

Introduction

Students with college degrees are likely to have high income and satisfactory employment outcomes (Ayalon et al. 2008). Yet, this positional advantage is diminished after universal higher education. To increase the value of their weak credentials, privileged students strategize their degree plans by enrolling in financially rewarding majors (Gerber and Schaefer 2004; Gerber and Cheung 2008; Iannelli, Gamoran and Paterson 2018) or selective universities (Grodsky and Jackson 2009; Reimer and Pollak 2010) or pursuing a graduate degree (Chang and Lin 2015). However, how students assess the value of degrees and position themselves in universal higher education before choosing a college and major is unclear. This study examines how students construct certain credentials as valuable before deciding on their college destinies and how online platforms shape such narratives.

In the wake of higher education expansion, scholars typically use two approaches to examine how students choose a college and major, that is, human capital theory and the credential approach. Human capital theorists argue that education is a source of economic growth (Schultz 1961). Individuals invest in education to learn skills and obtain economic returns and thus make educational decisions by assessing the cost of remaining in school, the likelihood of success by continuing their education, and future earnings (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Schultz 1961; Witteveen and Attewell 2017). While this approach may depict students' educational decisions when returns are stable and predictable, capturing their choices when the value of degrees and future payoffs

cannot be assessed accurately is difficult (Tomlinson 2008). Moreover, presuming that students make decisions by anticipating the consequences of an unforeseeable future can be dangerous, as higher education shifted from elite to mass education, but job markets and entry requirements also shifted to maintain selectivity in different occupations.

However, credential scholars focus on how people assess the value of degrees culturally. Tomlinson (2008) found that high school students amass education to secure a high status, income, and wealth. Moreover, the author showed that students can identify present statuses and hierarchies when choosing among available college options but are unable to predict their future earnings. What matters is not how much money one can earn through degrees but how people make sense the worth of degrees.

However, most credential scholars assume that the value of a credential is determined by employers' evaluations (Bills 2003; Bills 2004; Brown and Bills 2011), and few explore how individuals compare college options, assess those that are comparable, and redefine the meaning of degrees prior to selecting a university.

This study examines several questions. First, how do students make sense of the value of degrees and reclaim their positional advantage in universal higher education? Second, what narratives are developed online for guiding individuals' college choices and framing certain degrees as "smart" and others as "dumb" choices in the status-seeking process? Third, who dominates such narratives, and how do online settings replicate the power dynamics among degree holders? I use archival research and digital

ethnography to explore the meaning-making process online and observe how credentialism operates in this digital era.

Taiwan is an ideal case because of its online infrastructure and thriving digital community. The country has over 30 online counseling websites and social media sites for guiding students in choosing a college and major.¹ Two local social media sites, namely, PTT and Dcard, are influential among students when creating their college and major lists. Dcard users are mostly in their 20s, and PTT users are mostly in their 30s. The two social media sites amass approximately 20,000 posts each day, which are recirculated in other international social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram.² This online infrastructure created a thriving digital community, where people who are unfamiliar with colleges can seek advice from insiders and others can observe how people tease, laugh at, and undermine particular degrees. Different degree holders who may be segregated in their daily lives can gather online, negotiate the status of degrees, and defend their position in higher education. The two sites demonstrate status competition and allow researchers to observe how credentialism operates in online spaces.

This paper is organized as follows. First, I identify dominant narratives in online discussions that connect degree titles to job market outcomes. Second, I explain why

¹ No official statistics exist on college counseling websites. However, at least 11 websites from educational industries, five websites from universities, and several other sites developed by private actors or institutions exist. The College Admission Committee also has a website for helping students search for potential major and college options.

² Unlike DCard, PTT limited account registrations in 2009 to prevent fake accounts, misinformation, and companies from advertising their products.

such narratives are sustained and replicated in social media platforms through online interactions among degree holders. Finally, I capture how online social closure and censorship manifest the unequal power dynamics between degree holders. I synthesize three empirical findings into the concept of “public credentialism,” in which individuals assign value to degrees, thereby creating the groundwork for resistance and collective status building and addressing what superior credentials mean when choices are transparent and discussed publicly.

Prior Research

Credential Competition in Higher Education

Credentials, which are a type of cultural currency that provides the means to establish specialized professional and technical enclaves (Collins 1979 : 91), are often used to examine individual status attainment outcomes. This notion emphasizes the attainment of a certain degree level, highlighting the symbolic value of obtaining credentials rather than specific educational knowledge and skills (Collins 1979: 93). Numerous credential scholars examined the systematic ways credentials can strengthen social closure, which monopolizes entry to occupations, and how employers interpret different credentials (Rivera 2014; Brown 2001). This cultural membership, instead of technical skills, plays a crucial role in occupational chances.

Credential scholars focused on degree-to-workforce transitions, investigating how employers judge credentials to select employees among candidates for a particular position. Such judgements are crucial in the different stages of the attainment process. Employers choose prestigious or advanced degrees when distinguishing between degrees that applicants possess to sustain their selectivity (Collins 2008). However, students also employ qualitative assessments in their decision making. Baker (2011) argued that two educational credentialing processes exist after higher education expansion. The first process is vertical credentialing, in which entry into a job requires higher-level educational attainment rather than past educational requirements. The other process is horizontal credentialing, in which the use of an educational degree to access jobs is spread across occupations. Recent studies turned to dynamic, relational ways to discuss the value of degrees. Horowitz (2018) argued that it is not the absolute value of a degree but the relative value of a candidate competing with others that matters. The meaning of a degree refers to an individual's competitor pools, and oftentimes, the subjective assessment of degrees depends on local, relational contexts.

The shift to relative position taking provides room for the involvement of cultural narratives. When the value of a degree is relatively inconsistent and contingent on local contexts, people develop narratives and reassess the worth of a degree by determining what is comparable and what is not. Bills (2003) found that employers with different social backgrounds interpret candidates' degrees inconsistently. Some employers with an Ivy League background viewed the path from a nonselective university to a

prestigious university graduate program as a failure, whereas those from community colleges perceived this educational path as evidence of hard work (Brown 2001).

Employers also drew a clear line between different types of credentials. For instance, a law firm employer identified “top-four-school graduates” versus graduates from selective but less prestigious universities when screening candidates’ resumes (Rivera 2011). Using interviews with lab scientists, software engineers, and press officers, Tholen (2019) determined that the lab scientists valued undergraduate degrees in biology and chemistry, perceiving them as providing fundamental knowledge in lab skills to students, without emphasizing educational institutions. However, the value of educational credentials to press officers was relatively weak. Beyond employers in different occupations, the subjective assessment of a degree varies in different societies. A comparative study of Japan and the United States showed that a humanities degree is more likely to be undermined and devalued by the Japanese than the Americans (Ishida, Spilerman and Su 1997).

People assess the value of a degree using various parameters. For some individuals, a degree is closely related to scores and abilities. For others, a degree is loosely coupled with job skills and may open paths to different occupations. Some people draw a line between Ivy League universities and other schools, blurring the boundary between public and community colleges. Meanwhile, others believe that university tier matters more than majors. However, the role of employers in hiring is overemphasized, whereas how individuals assess the value of degrees in this era when degrees are no longer

closely linked with jobs is underexplored. On the one hand, high school students want to choose a university that will improve their future status. On the other hand, college students, defending their university, try to persuade degree seekers to make a decision, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies in the collective status-building process.

Digital Ethnography: Self-representation, Censorship, and Ways of Talking Online

Online counseling reduces biases through anonymity. However, social media and insider perspectives on understanding students' position taking are underexplored. As lives take place increasingly in digital environments, exploring how such environments shape social interactions is not only encouraged but necessary. Recently, numerous ethnographers shifted from traditional to digital field sites. Murthy (2008) called this approach digital ethnography, in which digital environments become field sites, and ethnographers in a virtual setting are often physically invisible. People generate narratives and communicate with others in cyberspace, such as in Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Such cyber fields form complex, fluid, and mobile spaces where people can gather easily. However, scholars rarely extend the digital ethnography method into the field of education and stratification. Quantitative studies largely dominated such fields, focusing on causal inferences rather than the meaning-making process.

Digital ethnographers highlighted three characteristics of online interactions on social media platforms, which in turn shape how people discuss and make sense of degrees. Kavanaugh and Maratea (2020) found that online users gather simultaneously

in specific sites, form online crowds, and reply to one another in particular threads or topics. For example, people tweet their opinions and create hashtags on Twitter to express their political views. On Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, people group themselves and share information on their daily lives. Online crowds gather around specific content related to certain dramatic events (Caliandro 2018). Short-term crowd gathering occurs, and dispersed and fragmented language are created as people convey and discuss information on social media.

The second characteristic of social media is its “public” space. In many online forums, freedom of speech is exercised prodigiously, and a sense of belonging is experienced by groups who may have minimal outlets for critical public discourse. Once created, a site can foster a virtual sense of belonging and enable people to congregate. However, an underlying media logic guides how information is generated, disseminated, and deleted online, which is often called online censorship (Roberts 2020). Such rules protect people’s right to speak and demonstrate a collective sense of how information is shared and disseminated.

While the two aforementioned characteristics reveal the uniqueness of cyberspace and how it shapes people’s sense of belonging and ways of talking, the last characteristic is the most important. Cyberspace protects people’s true identities. However, people also use digital media to represent themselves and create personal identities.

Winchester (2019) showed that accounts are key mechanisms through which narratives occur. Accounts are often “cast” by others in interactions and internalized in self-

presentation. Users employ online accounts to hide or obscure information when interacting with others. The three characteristics of social media, namely, online grouping, onsite censorship, and self-representation, foster people's degree-seeking process online and create public spaces that mirror existing power structures among degree holders.

The Changing Landscape in Taiwan's Higher Education

Taiwan's higher education system experienced three fundamental changes, which enabled researchers to examine how people make sense of the value of degrees. From 1995 to 2019, to respond to rising college education demands, the Taiwanese government lifted regulations to encourage private sectors and religious foundations to establish new universities. The number of universities increased from 25 public universities in 1994 to 129 universities in 2019 (Kuan et al. 2011; Chang 2012), evolving the system from a group of public institutions to a mix of public-private universities. To support the higher education expansion, many vocational four-year institutions were encouraged to 'upgrade' to four-year universities (Chou and Ching 2012) but did not receive essential support for transforming into such academic institutions. As a result, the percentage of high school graduates who entered colleges increased from 67.7% in 2000 to 87% in 2017 (Shavit 2007; Tsai, Smith and Hauser 2017), shifting to universal higher education, in which every high school student can gain entrance. As new

institutions emerged, students required increased information to assess the quality of their college options before claiming university membership.

However, attaining higher education does not guarantee future employment outcomes. In 2008, Taiwan experienced a global economic crisis, which transformed labor markets from relying solely on industrial sectors to service sectors. Numerous industries, such as electronics production, moved to China to reduce labor expenses. Jobs in service sectors increased but not enough to replace missing job opportunities (Chang and Lin 2015). This labor market transformation aligned with the higher education expansion, creating a relatively unstable linkage between degrees and jobs, compared with the era of elite higher education. Degree holders became increasingly anxious to ‘prove’ that their credentials are valid, legitimate, and valuable. The pressure of making ‘correct’ choices to increase degree value escalated, whereas connections between degrees and jobs became uncertain.

Compared with the transformation of the labor market and higher education system, college admissions remained relatively stable. The admission system is a centralized, state-governed system, in which the government controls the number of students that can enroll in a department and universities’ admission criteria and selection processes. Despite policymakers designating multiple channels for various social groups, the score system remained a strong indicator of the university hierarchy and ranking of majors (Tien and Fu 2009). Students rely on their entry scores to determine their chances of being admitted to a university as well as the status of a university or ranking of a major.

The entry score index shapes college selectivity, ranking, and status and further differentiates selectivity between public and private sectors (Yu 2018) and institutions located in the north and south (Yap 2018). Moreover, this index allows researchers to observe how students subjectively match status hierarchy, degree–work connections, and score parameters in their decision making.

Besides the three fundamental transformations, Taiwanese students choose a college and major jointly. This selection setting creates a dilemma for high school students in choosing between two status hierarchies, that is, a vertical hierarchy between prestigious and nonprestigious institutions and horizontal differentiation between lucrative and nonlucrative majors. Students constantly weigh each dimension and determine which one should be placed higher than the other after searching for colleges by score. In the first stage, students narrow down potential options via counseling websites then turn to online forums, alumni, and personal contacts to assess the available options. In this stage, students involve cultural narratives in their college option decision weighing. The Taiwanese context enables researchers to understand the meaning-making process that undergirds structural changes, with the stable score indicator reflecting the ranking of majors, hierarchy of institutions, and status-seeking process between two sides in students' subjective assessments within the digital community.

[Table 1]

Research Method

Data Mining in Two Sites

I selected two influential local social media sites, namely, PTT and Dcard, to explore college counseling activities. The PTT bulletin board system is the largest electronic bulletin board in Taiwan. It was established in 1995 by students from the National Taiwan University (NTU), which is the most prestigious university in the country, as a noncommercial and open source forum.³ Dcard, which was created by two NTU students in 2011, was originally designed for dating and socializing but later transformed into an information-sharing website.⁴ Both sites contain subpages covering topics such as gossip, dormitory life, food, girl talk, motorcycles, courses, job markets, and college life. Moreover, both sites have over 10,000,000 registered users, who generate over 20,000 posts per day, which are widely shared in traditional and social media, including TV news, newspapers, Facebook, and Instagram.

I selected the Dcard freshmen forum and PTT senior high forum to examine college-choosing narratives, as both sites serve as communication channels between college and high school students in a large digital community. I used keyword phrases such as “college option,” “predicting my future,” “choosing colleges,” and “majors” in article titles and contents to extract articles posted in PTT and Dcard in 2019. I gathered 614 posts from PTT and 1,269 posts from Dcard. In addition, I recorded the

³ Retrieved from PTT history, <https://pttpedia.fandom.com/zh/wiki/PTT%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2%E5%A4%A7%E4%BA%8B%E8%A1%A8>

⁴ Retrieved from Dcard history; the founders aimed to expand college students' networks and match them with others using Destiny Cards at midnight, whom they would not be able to know without social media.

comments under each post and the online information of each commenter. Online information in PTT includes IP addresses, user IDs, the order of commenters in a post, and “push” (like) and “hush” (dislike) features. Meanwhile, information in Dcard includes school names, gender headshots, nicknames, and “like” counts. I included the rules of both forums to capture online censorship. The final data included the extracted posts, users’ comments and ID information, and forum rules.

Digital Fieldwork

Given that the two forums are public and people can read the messages without logging in, I chose posts with over 30 replies to note how users interacted with one another. For each post, I took notes on how degree holders interacted with one another and how users made sense of the self-revealed information. I recorded commenters’ IDs, gender, and school titles to capture online gathering dynamics. Moreover, I noted who replied to whom and interactions among different degree holders to assess how users defended a particular university membership. In addition to online note taking, I observed digital censorship by examining the forum rules, announcements, and violation cases. Both forums regulated user account registration, addressed anonymous IDs, and constructed different levels of anonymity based on users’ social backgrounds.

Coding Schema

I analyzed the data in two stages and coded the online posts using a coding software (i.e., QDA). For each post, I divided the text into two parts, that is, how high school students framed their questions and how college students replied to such questions. For

the questions, I coded undecided students' choices, criteria, and preferences and the value they assigned to existing options. For the answers, I coded how college students provided suggestions to high school students, the underlying reasoning behind their suggestions, and their choice of evidence for persuading high school students. I combined my field notes on each post to capture the power dynamics among the speakers to examine what was said and not said. In PTT and Dcard, I recorded each speaker's gender, IP address, and school title to capture the demographic characteristics of the voiced and voiceless online.

[Table 2]

Is This Degree Valuable? Dominant Narratives Online

From July to August, before college submission deadlines, thousands of users gather in the two forums to seek college advice on universal higher education. New, anxious members post questions to college students and inquire about different topics, such as clarification of career paths related to seemingly equal majors, the status hierarchy between comparable institutions, and whether to prioritize majors over universities, or vice versa. Using their college placement exam scores as an indicator, high school students want to ensure that their credentials are adequately valuable before considering their degree options. Each inquiry triggers a debate about the value of a degree, the comparability of two college options, and priorities.

A post often triggers a status debate among degree holders. Jack, a student who dreamed of attending a first-tier law school, learned that his placement scores were

insufficient for admission to such a school and posted the following question: “Should I prioritize 1st tier admissions and turn to human science majors or prioritize law majors and turn to 2nd tier schools?” Being uncertain about two comparable options, he sought the opinion of insiders. After several minutes, a user replied, “I suggest you prioritize the four Ivy League schools in Taiwan, such as NTU, NTHU, NCTU, NCCU, and NCKU, because top 10 businesses in Taiwan only look at resumes of those who graduated from Ivy Leagues and throw out the resumes from other schools.” Citing an interview of an entrepreneur in *Common Wealth Magazine*, another user provided several reasons. However, this argument was soon challenged by a third user, who said that “NTU philosophy student earned only 30,000 TWN dollars per month, look at how little money a student earned with a prestigious school title but less prestigious major.” Noting the small economic rewards gained through a nonlucrative major, the pro-major side weighed the fields of a study heavily and perceived majors as tickets for entering professional labor markets. Most of the commenters emphasized the weak value of credentials, measuring their worth through monetary returns. Meanwhile, only a few users stated the importance of passion and interests in the discussion threads.

The two narratives reveal how individuals distinguish between degree options and how horizontal credentialing is employed in their subjective assessments (Baker 2011). For some students, Ivy Leagues signaled elite membership, but for others, only law, finance, and engineering degrees were comparable to Ivy League degrees. The value of a degree is linked with social closure consequences, career paths, and future earnings to

bet the value of credentials, as no one can foresee the future four years hence. Users referred to present signals, such as money and minimum entry scores, to project the future value of credentials. Two dimensions, that is, the prestigious hierarchy of universities and lucrative ranking of majors, were constantly referred to when one group undermined another. Surprisingly, no one calculated costs and benefits rationally in the narratives. Although various websites provide information on the average salaries of different occupations, the users did not cite salaries from human resource websites but highlighted magazines, interviews, and friends' experiences.⁵

When discussing majors, college students classified them as either prestigious or nonprestigious. For example, students compared math and physics majors to engineering and mechanic majors. Meanwhile, some users rudely teased humanity degree seekers in the PTT senior high forum, saying that "Humanity students are losers. 'The humanities' are those who score poorly in high schools." Others replied, "If your parents are rich then go for it, but do not do it otherwise you'll rely on others when coming of ages." A sharp status division exists between social science majors and engineering, law, business, and medical field majors. Yet, based on labor market statistics, the average earnings of humanities graduates are approximately 33,785 TWN dollars, higher than those of mechanic graduates and only 4,000 lower than those of business majors. The dominant narratives emphasized the division between the

⁵ Job hunting websites, such as 104 and 1011, provide a list of average salaries for different occupations. However, such resources were rarely cited by users compared with magazines, interviews, and friends' stories.

humanities and engineering disciplines and portrayed humanities graduates as having lower than average earnings.

The online users drew a solid line between Ivy Leaguers and others but remained open to different majors. High school student Jessy was undecided about her major and posted the following: “Could someone clarify how to weigh accounting, statistics, finance, and business management in my list?” She was confused and could not identify future career paths related to the majors. Noticing her confusion, a college student posted, “I recommend accounting as your first choice, statistics as your second choice, and business and management as your third choice because majoring accounting you’ll taught by several accountants in your third-year and build your network in an early stage. But for business management majors, you learn everything but nothing gives you a job.” A similar discussion occurred when Monica asked for help from English majors. A college student majoring in English literature suggested, “You have to think about what careers you pursue. English literature departments direct to author’s path, yet applied English, curriculum and technology in English, and teaching departments channel you to teaching careers.” The students connected future careers with current degrees to identify qualitative differences between degrees. However, monetary value remained a dominant indicator of the value of credentials.

Before choosing a degree, students employ horizontal differentiation in their assessments. The narratives in each segmented online communication reinforced users’ belief about the value of credentials. College students often encouraged position-taking

strategies, such as “washing out” credential titles by pursuing a graduate degree or shifting to a different major after being admitted to a low-tier university, without specifying costs and the difficulties of such activities, framing compromises as reasonable despite the limited number of people who have successfully done so in reality. However, the inconsistency between imagined and actual earnings remained in the dominant narratives.

Envy or Looking Down: Listen to Us because We Have Better Credentials

Why and how are dominant narratives sustained online? In the following section, I unpack how different levels of anonymity in the two online forums influence interactions among online users and why they consequentially create the power of high-tier university degree holders and sustain dominant narratives that reinforce the sheer value of credentials.

Degree holders, as social media users, gather online to sustain dominant narratives. This online grouping is highly dispersed, fragmented, and fluid around specific content in social media sites (Caliandro 2018). As online users, degree holders with an account and their accounts are “cast” by others in social interactions (Winchester 2019). These identifiers become a signal for online social closure, which is flexible in forming cultural memberships despite individuals believing that they are freely advising the next generation.

[Figure 1]

The college and high school students are exposed to online struggles, because their IDs partly reveal their personal information in the real world. Users can choose their ID in PTT but are forced to reveal their IP address when posting. In Dcard, users can select whether or not to reveal their major but are required to reveal their gender (through red or blue headshots) and school (through text) when commenting. Such markers enable users to judge whether a comment is trustworthy and can easily divide users into “us” and “them” when status markers, such as campus IP address, school name, major, and college entrance exam scores, are revealed. High school students are free from such status competition, as they have yet to commit to an institution and can switch between university membership. However, college students have little choice but to engage in this status struggle, as their degree titles are visible in Dcard and can be identified in PTT owing to their IP address. This format of displaying agreements and disagreements can also sharpen the division among online crowds. For each post in Dcard, users can express their opinion about a reply by either clicking “like” to express their agreement or “dislike” to express their disapproval. Meanwhile, in PPT, users can click on “push” to second an opinion or “hush” to undermine a user. This interaction format forces online users to express only two extreme opinions, without gray areas, to achieve a consensus. Both inconsequentially divide “us” from “them” by envying or looking down on other degree holders in the discussions.

Users either “envied” or “looked down” on other degree holders during interactions and dynamically defended the status of their institution when advising high school students. In a Dcard post, a high school student inquired about the comparability between private high-tier schools and public low-tier schools by posting the following question: “Hello senior students, I would love to hear your advice: Should I go to public schools because of cheaper tuition? Will private schools be worth more than public schools? If I choose Fu Jen private university, I can commute to campus comfortably.” Subsequently, a private school student replied, “Fu Jen is higher than Tamkang and Soochow Universities.” However, this reply was challenged by an NTU student, who stated, “I don’t see any difference between Fu Jen, Tamkang, and Soochow.” Another private school student angrily replied, “You are on the top of the strata. You do not know how we feel at the bottom and how it sucks to attend this kind of school.” In the comments, the students from prestigious schools looked down on and considered all private schools equal, deserving no further distinction. By contrast, the private school degree holders envied and were jealous of the high-tier degree holders, regretting that they could not study in high-tier institutes.

Although online grouping is fluid, several patterns can be observed in the degree holders’ interactions. Top-tier degree holders were never challenged in the threads and constantly voiced their opinions when defending the status of second-tier private university degree holders. Second-tier public university students were challenged if their school entry scores were low, which were used to determine the hierarchy of their

institution. In a post, a student challenged National Chung Cheng University and stated its precarious position as a second-tier institution. A third-tier degree holder tried to propose alternative measures, such as networks and career opportunities, to challenge the existing status hierarchy based on scores; however, such measures were unsuccessful. He was yelled at and expelled from the most of the replies on the thread, with replies such as “Come on, you such a degree buyer, stop doing useless things and think your school is the best.” Students from fourth-tier schools were called out several times for advising high school students, as some users believed that such students were no better than high schoolers. Vocational college students were expelled from the discussion threads, because they were not considered by others as “college students” with equal rights to speak. Meanwhile, other forum members first deprecated their school before encouraging high school students to apply to specific schools. This type of online social interaction created another layer of implicit advising, with college students telling high school students how they may be treated online if they obtained certain degrees.

Furthermore, the students argued about the status of their institution and occasionally, their major. In one post, a high school student who achieved an extremely high score sought advice on whether to choose a natural science or social science major and received nearly 80 tweets. Many of the comments suggested a medical major and undermined social science majors. Other users laughed at his concerns about his personal interests, posting comments such as, “Okay, if you want, I’d suggest finance or

business management in NTU. But why don't you choose medical school, do not waste your scores." Whenever a student majoring in social sciences, such as philosophy, anthropology, or literature, tried to challenge the status of medical, law, or engineering degrees, he or she encountered serious pushbacks from users who chose lucrative majors. This advising process sorts students in their rightful place based on their college entrance exam scores.

Degree seekers were eager to maintain the status of institutions, especially when resistance to the hierarchy existed. Online interactions offer another layer of tacit college knowledge about how people perceive the value of the credentials that high school students will select. Despite some users trying to interrupt the existing ranking of universities and majors and proposing alternative measures for ranking such options, such suggestions encountered pushbacks. Users strategically employed one status dimension to undermine the other and consistently referred to status identifiers, such as scores, institutions, and majors, to discuss whether a school was "higher," "lower," or "comparable." Online social interactions are consistent with prior findings on the relative value of credentials (Horowitz 2018) and portray how people collectively negotiate relative values online. The online grouping process, together with different levels of anonymity, in the two forums made Ivy League membership easily identifiable and diminished other degree holders. While social closures are typically sustained via closed membership, the case of Taiwan reveals how open forums force different degree holders to interact online, as they may never meet one another in real life.

Online Elitism: The Voiced and Voiceless in Social Media

Online censorship can exert a huge impact on information access and narratives (Roberts 2020), as it regulates what messages can be seen on social media platforms. In the PTT senior high forum, users are required to have a record of zero negative posts to reply to high school students' questions. In the Dcard undergrad forum, users cannot reveal their personal contact information to maintain their anonymity. These regulations create a division between those who can speak and those who cannot, thereby exacerbating status hierarchy differences among speakers. I address online censorship and cyber cultures in Dcard and PTT separately and examine the voiced and voiceless online population.

Dcard users are identifiable in terms of their gender and school characteristics. In the 1,260 posts, male speakers from selective universities dominated the discussion threads. They expressed their opinion in every inquiry regardless of whether or not they were from the institutions the high school students were asking about. By contrast, female students expressed their opinion only when an inquiry was related to their major or university, voicing their opinions only when they felt qualified. This difference creates a gender dynamics between those who speak and those who do not. Men act as authoritative figures, whereas women censor themselves and speak only in relevant discussions.

The cyber culture of PTT and Dcard shapes how users construct their narratives and gain a reputation by replying to questions. Dcard users favor direct and brief

answers over well-reasoned arguments. By contrast, PTT users value well-reasoned arguments with references. If their reasoning is well articulated, PTT users can gain a reputation despite their lack of a prestigious degree, which is reflected in the number of pushes in their post. However, Dcard users tie their opinions to their credential titles, using their credential titles in their arguments. Tony, a college student, displayed this argument style in PTT, stating, “I studied college choices for years and figured out six principles: 1. placing 70% on majors and 30% on schools, except a huge gap exists between university hierarchy and major ranking. Career, salary, and job PTT forums are great resources to look for information. 2. Don’t rely on future plans such as transferring majors and universities, you should choose what is acceptable for you in present.” Tony offered several reasons to support each principle and cited sources at the end of his long post. His narrative consisted of a list of arguments, evidence supporting each statement, and citations. Meanwhile, Dcard users employ informal language, with direct, fragmented sentences.

While gender inequality among the speakers remains explicit, class inequality is implicit in PTT and Dcard. The style of talking in PTT reveals assumptions about structured essay formats, which are often employed as homework, papers, and assignments in top-tier universities. However, the style of talking in Dcard reveals informal ways of chatting, which are conveyed through daily interactions in college life. By citing friends, gossip, and stories of neighbors as well as prestigious titles, Dcard users utilize a shorthand to quickly judge the relative value of one group over another.

Class inequality operates implicitly via two ways of talking, that is, the hidden way of using middle-class language in PTT and the explicit way of showing symbolic titles in Dcard.

The power dynamics transformation between PTT and Dcard exacerbates the ways in which degree power works on social media platforms. PTT was established for NTU students to share information about daily life without commercial goals. However, Dcard was created to expand NTU students' social networks and pair them with those who can offer help, relying on relatively transparent degree titles to match users. PTT restricted user registration after online users began abusing their right to share information and advertising products. As a result, many users transferred to Dcard, which quickly outranked PTT as the most influential online forum in Taiwan. This transformation exacerbated the existing power dynamics among the degree holders. Previously, students with less-prestigious degrees may generate well-reasoned discourses and gain a reputation online. However, as Dcard overtook PTT, degree seekers easily wielded their power by exhibiting their credential titles and group membership.

Discussion and Conclusion

The concept of credentialism was first proposed by Collins (1979), who argued that in the 20th century, educational credentials are the means for building specialized professional and technical enclaves and serve the needs of dominant groups to monopolize jobs. However, much of the meaning-making process is overlooked when

this notion is employed in educational research. Researchers view returns from degrees as relatively stable or determined by structural changes, such as educational expansion, technological reform, and cultural status membership (Brown 2001; Brown and Bills 2011). How degree holders make sense of degrees and how this sense making engages them in status competition are relatively unknown. While recent studies argue that the value of educational products should be viewed not as absolute but relational (Bills 2016), local communication contexts regarding degree value are underexplored.

This study takes a relational turn to investigate how credentialism operates in public online forms, where people determine one another's value by judging and foreseeing the future value of their credentials. I reveal three dimensions, constructing public credentialism through online social closure, belief about the sheer value of credential titles, and the transformation of degree power. I observe that online narratives construct beliefs about the sheer value of credentials, measuring worth by applying it to monetary awards, and undermine self-interests and passions despite the connection between degrees and jobs being uncertain. However, this firm belief, which is inconsistent with college graduates' actual earnings, is sustained by social closures online, where prestigious degree holders defend second- and bottom-tier students self-expelled from discussions. The transformation of power between the two social media sites, namely, PTT and Dcard, reinforces degree power by explicitly addressing credential titles. Compared with prior studies that focus on how credential power operates in private settings, such as hiring and recruitment, I identify empirical

dimensions revealing the phenomenon of public credentialism. We assert, reassure, and make sense of the meaning of a degree and whether it is worth pursuing through negotiations and communication. This collective status-building process reinforces the overall system, placing certain types of degrees over others.

Our lives have become increasingly embedded in digital environments. We transit through a combination of virtual and face-to-face settings, where we move within and between two different “social sites.” Although I use two social media platforms in Taiwan as my field sites, my findings are not limited to Taiwan and can be applied to broader contexts. By employing digital ethnography in educational research, I propose that it can provide resources for enriching the meaning-making process either across different time periods or various social groups who may not be able to gather in physical sites. Despite many educational activities conducted online, this “new normal” remains underexplored. Such activities include but are not limited to college discussions on Reddit, online rumors about job markets, and how student interactions and bullying activities are transformed in cyberspace. Increased research to understand such phenomena as well as how inequality is replicated in online settings is necessary.

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Table1: Selectivity and Hierarchy of Universities in Taiwan⁶

Tier1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	
China Medical University	69.61 Chung Shan Medical University	58.58 Shih Hsin University	51.52 Chinese Culture University	37.14
National Central University	70.87 Asia University	52.16 Chung Yuan Christian University	49.02 Chung Hua University	28.39
National Sun Yat-sen University	69.3 National Chiayi University	54.17 Yuan Ze University	48.16 Fo Guang University	34.54
National Chung Cheng University	68.79 National Pingtung University	55.31 National Ilan University	46.86 Nanhua University	29.7
National Chung Hsing University	66.9 National Changhua University of Education	64 National United University	43.35 Da-Yeh University	29.32
National Chiao Tung University	76.9 National Chi Nan University	57.57 National Taitung University	44.31 Shih Chien University	42.51
National Cheng Kung University	73.39 National Dong Hwa University	54.74 National Taiwan University of Sport	47.82 University of Kang Ning	22.55
National Chengchi University	78.63 National Taichung University of Education	58.48 National Quemoy University	43.99 Tzu Chi University	41.38
National Tsing Hua University	76.6 National University of Tainan	56.86 Tatung University	42.98 Hsuan Chuang University	34.47
National Taipei University	74.77 Tainan National University of the Arts	54.72 Tunghai University	47.77 Aletheia University	27.78
National Taipei University of Education	65.48 National Taiwan Ocean University	58.63 Tamkang University	47.57 I-Shou University	36.29
National Taiwan University	80.53 National University of Kaohsiung	62.37 Feng Chia University	45.63 Huafan University	27.53
National Taiwan Normal University	70.66 National Kaohsiung Normal University	59.42 Ming Chuan University	45 Chang Jung Christian University	32.95
National Taiwan University of Arts	65.66 Soochow University	60.03 Providence University	43.68 Kainan University	22.09
National Yang-Ming University	79.11 University of Taipei	62.48		
Taipei Medical University	73.45 Fu Jen Catholic University	58.83		
Mackay Medical College	69.08 Chang Gung University	61		
	Kaohsiung Medical University	64.12		

Table 2. Coding Schema

Concepts	Codes	Code Segments
College questions	Comparable options	College options listed by students, including majors and colleges
	Choice questions	How students frame choice questions and dilemmas in their online questions
Choosing majors	Future connected with majors	Connections built by students between degrees and careers
	Earnings vs. interest	Priorities emphasized by students when describing how to select a major
	Ranking of majors	How users rank existing major options and implicit evaluations among majors
Choosing schools	Future connected with schools	Future projections imagined by students if a user attends a certain type of college
	Prestige & membership	Connections built by students between degrees and careers
	Hierarchy of institutions	How users rank institutions, the ambiguities of the ranking indicator, and subjective assessments
Online interactions	We and they	How users gather online, form social groupings in each post, and create a boundary between “we” and “they”
	Social closure	Occurrence of social exclusion online and its contexts
	Status struggles	How people interact with others, looking up or down on others in online interactions
Censorship	Anonymity	Levels of anonymity among IP identifiers, how easily users can be identified, and population characteristics
	Rules of speaking	Rules of speaking, including explicit rules and implicit norms

Figure 1. Discussion Format in PTT Senior High Forum (left) and Dcard Undergrad Forum (right)

→ edward8726 : Wearing a doctor's uniform, a bunch of girls can also post it up 07/25 14:03
Close your eyes and stick it hard hahaha
Push shock1021 : terrible @@ 07/25 14:04
→ IDfor2010 : No matter how ugly a doctor is, there will be a bunch of girls 07/25 14:04
Is there any hanging?
Push microuzi9797 : This great doctor is correct 07/25 14:07
Push JimmyRod : National Taiwan University Financial Services 07/25 14:13
Push ocf001497 : ... 07/25 14:16
Push castalchen : Isn't this score chosen by any volunteer? 07/25 14:17
It's not that the society doesn't seem to have a good law test
Push castalchen : This kind of students who are gifted in mathematics and science with humanistic
care and international outlook 07/25 14:19
→ castalchen : It is recommended to fill in the public-funded students of the Department of
Medicine of National Taiwan University to do their best for rural medical care 07/25 14:20
→ castalchen : force 07/25 14:20
Didn't you ask him to sign?
Push SchT : Push upstairs 07/25 14:21
Push bbo214 : Choosing a department for the girl...will regret it later 07/25 14:24
But if you don't have a girl to spend your life with...
Push IDfor2010 : Upstairs XD 07/25 14:24
Push randy211161 : National Taiwan University doctor or electrical machinery thank you 07/25 14:24
Hush Fun2T : Is the last name Ke? 07/25 14:24

85 total responses

Department of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, National Taiwan Normal University 7
B 1 | July 18, 2019 21:30

Zhang Normal School and United Donghua are at the same level! ?

Department of Marketing Management, University of Westminister 2
B 2 | July 18, 2019 21:35

The point is, what department are you interested in? Just go to that department!

anonymous 2
B 3 | July 18, 2019 21:39

b1 . He said that only those countries can go to

National Chung Hsing University 4
B 4 | July 18, 2019 21:47

The second category of public is Zhangshi Chiayi can continue to recommend private

National Chiayi University 0
B 5 | July 18, 2019 22:27

Help me fulfill my dream and go to China to teach

Fu Jen Catholic University 0
B 6 | July 18, 2019 22:29