

# **A netnography of International Students studying in the UK: Leveraging Social Capital to Enhance Employability**

## **Abstract:**

This study utilises a netnography approach to investigate the perceptions of employability and social capital among Indian and other international students and prospective students. There is a strong relationship and understanding between the UK and India who both place great emphasis on the value of University study and studying abroad. Both countries have high quality Universities and value the idea of cultural and international exchange of staff and students.

Whilst there are a range of studies regarding international students, little is known about international students and their perceptions and motivations for studying abroad with regards to employability. Employment and seeking further opportunity are generally a considerable motivator for students wishing to study abroad and Indian students are no exception. In recent years, changes from the UK government to Visa and post study work rules have had positive and negative effects to student's employability, networks and mobility. Furthermore, the rise of Artificial Intelligence and other disruptive technologies has also challenged what we know about the job market.

The concept of widening one's network is also seen as critical to finding and securing skilled and desirable jobs. The concept of social capital and building relationships is seen as critical in many cultures. By incorporating social capital theory, our research focuses on bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. The primary research question addresses the perceptions and influences of Indian students regarding employability through social media research using a netnography approach. Social media influencers are also ever present on platforms and sometimes influence students in their perceptions of employability and study abroad. We also highlight the role of social capital in connecting these influencers with the students.

## **Introduction:**

The objective of this research is to explore the relationship between employability and social capital specifically among Indian international students through a netnography approach (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography is the most established way of conducting qualitative social media research, having three editions of the guide by Professor Robert Kozinets who founded netnography in the 1990's. Netnography should always contain insights from being immersed in appropriate social media sites and recorded in an immersion journal. We also combine these qualitative insights with quantitative data from social media platforms through a social network analysis (SNA) approach (Ahmed et al, 2022)

This study therefore integrates social capital theory, focussing on bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. The research questions investigate the employability status of Indian students, significant influencers in their employability discourse, their perspectives on employability as expressed on social media, and how social capital connects these influencers with Indian students. This study is significant in order to continue to be effective in emerging markets and crossing the digital divide. The cross fertilisation of knowledge exchange through student mobility between global North and South also relates to the concept of shifting world order.

## Literature

A number of relevant studies have been conducted which we also intend to draw upon and build on that earlier work, for example, (Neri and Ville, 2008 P.1) studied international students and social capital and highlighted that: “international university students arrive in their host country generally denuded of social capital and confronted by unfamiliar cultural and educational institutions.” This is important as many UK Universities highlight the potential to help build and grow those networks and Indian students also are motivated to study abroad in order to increase and widen their networks, especially through weaker ties (linking social capital). [Granovetter's \(1973\)](#) classic study of the importance of ‘weak ties’ amongst more distant acquaintances highlights the importance of a larger and more diverse network as opposed to ‘strong ties’ which are close friends or family with similar backgrounds. In India, the concept of bonding social capital within a village is a good example of this but could also be seen to be restrictive with the lack of weak tie building opportunities.

Whilst employability of international students is generally good within the confines of visa rules - often students are faced with low skilled or low paid work whilst studying. Neri and Ville, 2008 P.1 note that “the great majority of paid student employment was in quite menial tasks unrelated to their area of study, and so it is possible that paid work substitutes for, rather than complements, academic study”. This would be consistent with the view that paid work is about earning money and not about building social capital”. The authors call for more studies evaluating the role of social capital and to understand more about the objectives of international students. Finally, Raaper et al (2024) studied the role of student social media influencers relating to support. We also respond to their call for future research on student influencers in order to address these gaps.

## Research questions

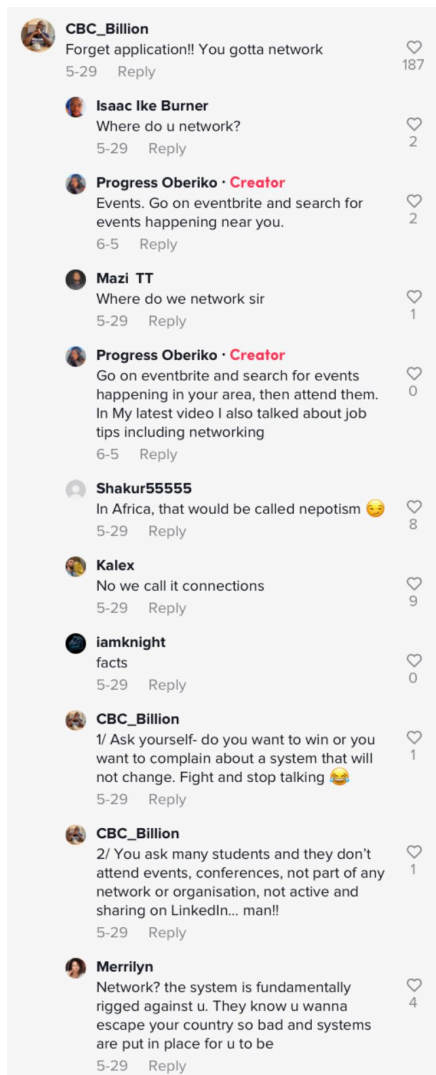
1. **The Current Situation of Indian Students' Employability:** This research question will be addressed by conducting a literature review, examining graduate outcomes, and analysing social media immersion journals. The discussion will summarise key findings from the literature, providing insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indian students regarding employability in the UK. It will highlight existing literature gaps and emphasise the need for a netnographic approach to capture the real-time experiences and perspectives of Indian students.
2. **Key Influencers for employability among Indian students:** This question proposes the use of social network analysis (SNA) and immersion journals to identify key influencers in the employability context. The discussion will delve into findings from SNA, identifying influential individuals or groups shaping Indian students' employability discourse. It will explore reasons behind their influence, including expertise, credibility, or social connections. Immersion journal data will provide qualitative insights into the narratives and messages propagated by these influencers.
3. **Indian students' perspectives on employability on social media:** This question investigates what Indian students are saying about employability on social media platforms. The discussion will present themes, sentiments, and trends from the immersion journal data, highlighting the diversity of perspectives, concerns, and aspirations expressed by Indian students regarding their employability. It will also

reflect on the impact of social media on their employability, including access to information, networking opportunities, and exposure to professional communities.

- 4. The role of social capital in connecting influencers and Indian students:** This question explores how social capital contributes to the connection between influencers and Indian students through social media. The discussion will provide an overview of social capital theory, focusing on bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. It will analyse netnographic findings to assess how social capital influences the engagement between influencers and Indian students, considering the implications for access to resources, networks, and opportunities to enhance employability.

## Findings so far

We have commenced data collection and will aim to report initial findings in September 2024. We aim to capture data on the context-specific nature of Indian students' employability experiences with regard to studying in the UK. For example, the screenshot below demonstrates an example of international students discussing the role of networks in relation to employability on the platform LinkedIn.



The analysis of these conversations through netnography and social network analysis will highlight the significance of social capital theory and its potential implications for policy and practice in supporting Indian students' mobility, employability and knowledge transfer. Finally, it will suggest avenues for future research, such as exploring interventions to enhance social capital among Indian students or investigating the longitudinal effects of social media engagement on employability perceptions and outcomes.

## **References**

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