

Space and Identity Construction: A Study of Female Singaporean Undergraduates in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the significance of space in international student identity formation, focusing specifically on the experiences of female Singaporean undergraduate students in the UK. By examining three spatial scales (public, institutional, and room spaces), this article employs a mixed methods approach to investigate how identity is spatially situated and spatially performed. Findings indicate that public and institutional spaces shape students' feelings of Otherness, racial hypervisibility, and individual invisibility. Students' strategies for resisting negative identities also differ across these spaces. On the other hand, room spaces and their objects and layouts are agentially used by participants to perform their identities to others and themselves. Thus, this article highlights the importance of the spatial dimension in producing a nuanced understanding of international student identity formation.

Keywords: identity, international students, race, Singaporean, space, women

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the UK has become increasingly globalized, with the number of international students rising in recent years. In 2017–18, there were 458,490 international students enrolled in universities across Britain, accounting for almost 20% of students in British higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019). Given these trends, it is important to understand international students' lived experiences and processes of identity construction, so as to implement programs that cater more effectively to their needs and well-being (Gargano, 2012; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Molinsky, 2007). In particular, this article considers the experiences and identity construction of female Singaporean undergraduate students, a group that has not been well represented in existing literature. This is despite the fact that Singapore was within the top 10 non-EU countries sending university students to the UK in 2015–16, and that the number of Singaporean undergraduates in the UK has been increasing in recent years (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017). Indeed, as Singaporean students are native English speakers and tend not to face the language difficulties that many (Asian) international students encounter, it is especially concerning that their unique experiences are currently neglected. Furthermore, given Singapore's status as a former British colony, exploring Singaporean students' experiences also enables an understanding of students' identity formation as postcolonial subjects, thus offering a perspective that has yet to be considered.

Existing literature on international students' identity formation tends to explore the role of language difficulties, cultural differences, and race in shaping students' identity (Andrade, 2009; Lewis, 2016; Ting-Toomey, 2005). However, it neglects to consider how different spaces influence students' identity construction by foregrounding these factors in specific ways. Instead, space is often regarded as an "empty container within which social life takes place" (Farrugia, 2014, p. 297). This article aims to fill this gap in the literature, and examines how space and identity are mutually constitutive (Cresswell, 2004). It thus seeks to understand how spaces can shape the identities of Singaporean undergraduate students in the UK, as well as how these students actively use particular places to construct their identities. To this end, I examine students' experiences at three spatial scales—public spaces (freely accessible to members of the public), institutional spaces (university buildings, classrooms, common rooms), and students' room spaces.

At this point, it should be noted that geographers often draw a distinction between “place,” which refers to perceptions of space that are imbued with subjective meaning (Tuan, 1977), and “space,” which refers to a more abstract entity whose relations are structured by broader social inequalities (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). However, this is not my concern here, and I recognize that one’s subjective experiences in specific places are themselves structured and mediated by identity categories such as race (Manzo, 2003). As such, I will take the liberty of using both “place” and “space” interchangeably.

In the next section, I provide a brief review of existing literature on international student identity formation, before drawing on insights from geographical literature that foreground the interactions between identity and place. I also introduce the sociological concept of impression management (Goffman, 1956) to understand how racialized identities can be resisted. In order to better understand Singaporean students as postcolonial subjects, I also draw on Puwar’s (2004) notion of “imperial language” and Fanon’s (1986) conception of postcolonial subjects’ sense of inferiority. Following this, I present my mixed methods approach, before discussing data collected from a small sample of eight female Singaporean undergraduates in the UK. In the last section, I conclude that identity is spatially situated and spatially performed, before highlighting some limitations and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students and Identity

Identity refers to “abiding qualities [that] individuate and allow us to recognize individuals, categories, [and] groups” (Wiley, 1994, p.130). It is constituted through an amalgamation of experiences, memories, perceptions, and actions (Marginson, 2014). While identities encompass a “feeling of biographical continuity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54), they are also malleable over time and negotiated across contexts (Stewart, 2008). Indeed, sociologists and psychologists have highlighted how identity negotiation is enacted in and through social interactions, as well as through processes of self-presentation (Lawler, 2013; Swann & Bosson, 2008).

Within existing literature on international students’ identity construction, scholars have focused significantly on the impacts of language barriers on communication and positive identity construction. They have thus explored the effects of nonnative language proficiency on international students’ integration and identity, primarily from an Anglophone context (Hsieh, 2006;

Montgomery, 2010; Tananuraksakul, 2012). While useful, this body of literature is less relevant to the purposes of this article, since the focus here is on native English speakers. However, it remains important to note that beyond linguistic ability, lack of knowledge on cultural slang can also generate difficulties in assimilation (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014). Similarly, the lack of “legitimate” accents or syntax—which constitute the “imperial language” as performed by the coloniser (Puwar, 2004)—can lead to real and/or perceived exclusion (Kamara, 2017).

Current literature on international students’ identity formation has also devoted much attention to the impacts of cultural differences and racial stereotypes on identity. Culture shock and difficulties with assimilation can lead to self-segregation and threats to students’ identity and sense of self (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Zaharna, 1989). Racial stereotyping and discrimination in higher education have also been theorized widely in both Euro-American and Asian contexts (Houshmand et al., 2014; Lewis, 2016; Pyne & Means, 2013; Ritter, 2016). In particular, Sue et al.’s (2007) notion of racial microaggressions has been especially influential, and provides a framework to understand “negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271) that occur on a daily basis, intentionally or otherwise. This has been useful in theorizing subtle everyday practices of racialization that threaten minority international students’ integration and identity (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013; Yeo, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2019).

However, much of this literature has not considered the significance of space in shaping international students’ identity. This is despite the fact that identities are formed and “continually reworked, contested and reproduced” in and through space (Shome, 2003, p. 43), as geographers have long insisted. Indeed, studies that do consider space in relation to students’ racialized identities have tended to stem from the discipline of geography. However, these typically discuss race and spaces of (de)segregation in American educational institutions, and do not consider international students (Harwood, Mendenhall, Lee, Riopelle, & Hunt, 2018; Inwood & Martin, 2008; Thomas, 2005; Veninga, 2009). Additionally, these studies focus on the space of the school or university, and neglect to consider how racialization may shape students’ identity in public spaces beyond the campus. Indeed, as Puwar (2004) highlights, bodies that are not the “somatic norm” in a particular place are considered “space invaders,” marked as Other, and consequently subject to surveillance and informal regulations.

Nevertheless, certain insights on the interactions between race, space, and students’ identity remain valuable. In their recent study, Harwood et al. (2018)

proposed a typology of spaces to better understand the experiences of students of color within institutions of higher education. They posited that spaces are (a) fortified, wherein overt and intentional acts of racism occur, (b) contradictory, wherein racial slights are subtle and frequently unintentional, or (c) counter, wherein students of color resist white dominance and create spaces that are welcoming to themselves. They further claim that contradictory spaces are the most common type of space in institutions of higher education. In classrooms for example, students of color may feel ignored by teachers, find that their perspectives are “neither understood nor valued,” or discover that they are taken to represent their racial group (Harwood et al., 2018, p.1253). Yet, being contradictory spaces, classrooms can also offer the possibility of resisting racial stereotypes and essentialized identities through interracial interactions. As Alexander and Knowles (2005, p. 5) highlight, space thus “simultaneously sustains the existing [social] order and offers the prospect of its subversion.”

Space and Identity

While literature on international students has yet to thoroughly consider the interactions between space and identity, geographical literature is particularly useful in this regard. Geographers have long recognized the role of place in shaping identity (Conradson & McKay, 2007; Pile & Keith, 1993; Rose, 1995; Taylor, 2010). As both the material features/layouts and situated practices in specific spaces shape identity constitution (Cresswell, 2004), identity construction can be considered a “spatially situated process” (Hetherington, 1998, p. 17).

In public spaces for instance, racial hypervisibility is significant in causing persons of color to feel “out of place” (Ahmed, 2000; Cresswell, 2004). Persons of color are frequently subjected to a racializing gaze, and are more likely to have their behavior policed or regulated (Puwar, 2004). Indeed, in a postcolonial context, Fanon (1986) has suggested that a racializing gaze may also lead to internalized feelings of inferiority, as the white gaze “fixes” non-white (former) colonial subjects as Other and inferior. Furthermore, race interacts with gender to subject Asian women to “aggressive gazes” from white, heterosexual men in public space (Green & Singleton, 2006). The notion that Asian women may be considered exotic and/or particularly desirable (Lee, 2005) can exacerbate women’s selective avoidance of public spaces due to safety concerns (Manzo, 2005). In these ways, the visibility of social difference in public spaces interact with social meanings attached to race and gender, to make such spaces especially significant in identity

constitution (Pratt & Hanson, 1994). The interaction between space and identity is also dynamic, as social differences may or may not be marked as visible in different spaces (Tonkiss, 2005). Thus, a Chinese woman may be racially unmarked in public spaces in Singapore (where the population is primarily Chinese), but her race and gender may both be highly visible in certain public spaces in the UK. Spaces are therefore not just “inert backdrops against which struggles of identity occur,” but actively constitute the “unequal and heterogeneous production” of identities (Shome, 2003, p.43).

However, it would be erroneous to imagine that persons of color are passive in the face of Othering in public space. On the contrary, individuals engage in what Goffman (1956) has termed “impression management,” whereby they undertake certain practices and dispositions to convey impressions of themselves that suit their own interests, and “oblige” others to value and treat them respectably (Goffman, 1956, pp. 3–6). Given that Othering in public space occurs through the hypervisibility of embodied social differences (race and gender amongst others; Britton, 2008), impression management strategies may rely accordingly on the adoption of certain embodied comportments that minimize difference (Holton & Riley, 2013).

In contrast to public spaces, where individuals have relatively little control over how their identities are constructed by others, home spaces can be organized to express and reflect identity (Hurdley, 2006). As “home spaces” for international students often mean temporary, private bedrooms away from family (Holton & Riley, 2016), I focus instead on the micro-scale of room spaces in exploring how students construct personal identities. Indeed, Holton and Riley (2016) have considered the importance of room spaces in identity development for British students who leave their parental homes for university. However, this analytic focus is nascent and has not been taken up by theorists of international student identity formation. In particular, personal objects in room spaces are significant in facilitating students’ transition to university (Chow & Healey, 2008). As objects are a “material testament to who we are,” they provide a physical link to experiences and feelings that constitute one’s identity (Bachelard, 2014, p. 4), and can help to preserve a sense of identity continuity despite major changes in routines or experiences (Giddens, 1991; Mallett, 2004; Marcoux, 1999).

Indeed, room spaces can also be understood as the “stage” on which students construct and perform identity (Goffman, 1961). Personal objects thus become “props” that can be strategically employed in identity performance and management. It is important to note, however, that the room space collapses the distinction between the “front” stage—site of

performance—and the “back” stage, where “the impression fostered by the performance [may be] knowingly contradicted” (Goffman, 1956, p.69). This is not only because students do not have access to a separate “front” stage (often a living room) in their accommodations, but also because their performances of personal identity in their rooms are also processes of self-indication—affirming their identities to and for themselves (Hurdley, 2006). Room spaces hence enable students’ identities to be creatively and agentially expressed, thus drawing attention to how different spaces shape identity construction in specific ways.

As such, geographical and sociological literature highlight how space and identity are mutually constitutive, and can be placed in productive conversation with existing literature on international student identity construction. In the next section, I present my research methodology, before demonstrating how Singaporean students’ identities are constructed differently in and through public, institutional, and room spaces.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

This research was grounded in an interpretivist epistemology that sought to understand how individuals experience and negotiate social reality (Blaikie, 1993) in and through various spaces. It was a small-scale study involving eight female Singaporean undergraduates, who had been selected for their highly specific and subjective experiences of being an international student (Gargano, 2012) in the UK. Such purposive sampling was particularly useful in exploring the significance of space on international students’ identity construction, a topic that has been little theorized (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

All participants in this study had spent between 1–3 years studying and living in the UK. One had studied in Cambridge, one in Birmingham, one in Glasgow, two in London, and three in Durham. Participants’ transition to university in the UK had also been their first exposure to independent living away from family, thus making their experiences especially significant for understanding identity construction.

Crucially, all participants were ethnic Chinese Singaporeans. This was a deliberate decision to examine how racial identity is spatially contingent (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003), since participants would be part of the 74.3% Chinese majority in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2016), but constitute a minority group in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2012). In addition, all eight participants were female students. This was

partially a result of convenience sampling—due to compulsory National Service requirements for Singaporean males, my contacts who were in a UK university at the time of research were predominantly female. However, focusing on female participants was also useful in two key ways. Firstly, this enabled an examination of how racial and gender hypervisibility in public space intersect to shape identity construction (Green & Singleton, 2006). Secondly, research on home/room spaces has shown that gendered differences exist in the use of room spaces and objects to construct identities, with women using room decorations in performances of identity much more than men (Holton & Riley, 2016). Thus, focusing on female participants was ultimately appropriate given the research’s aim to provide a formative study on how space and international student identity are mutually constitutive.

Given my own status as a Singaporean student at the time of research, I was able to recruit participants from personal contacts (Sarantakos, 2005). My insider status and familiarity with participants also enabled them to feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences on potentially sensitive topics of identity formation and racialization (Bryman, 2004), and mitigated any power differentials that participants may have perceived with a researcher of a different racial or national background (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). At the same time, I practiced “empathetic neutrality” (Patton, 2005), thus ensuring a level of detachment that gave the data primacy.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and visual methods of photo elicitation. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to discuss their personal experiences and feelings (Reinharz, 1992), with the flexibility to focus on idiosyncratic details or experiences that the researcher had not anticipated (Fielding & Thomas, 2008). This was effective in addressing the research question of how public, institutional, and room spaces shape students’ identity construction differently. Additionally, participants were asked to provide photographs of their room spaces in the UK and in Singapore prior to the interviews. Since photographs are able to “convey the qualities of materiality more directly” than verbal descriptions (Rose, 2008, p.155), they were particularly useful in my research, which was interested in material room layouts and tangible biographical objects” (Plummer, 2001). Photo elicitation also effectively complemented semi-structured interviews, since the photographs enabled “a dialogue with the participants to visually and orally interpret the material and affective significance of their belongings” (Holton & Riley, 2016, p.630). Thus, participants and I discussed

the rationale for and significance of particular room layouts and personal objects, using the photographs as key referents during the interviews (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008). In instances where participants did not wish to send photographs of their room spaces, they voluntarily provided sketches of room layouts, which were then similarly used to elicit discussion.

Participants' interview responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were coded with systematic codes that identified emerging themes, which were then clustered into axial codes that specified general themes in subsequent rounds of coding (David & Sutton, 2011). Close reading of the data also facilitated coding through both manifest and latent codes, and uncovered the nuances of participants' responses (David & Sutton, 2011). This enabled the examination of patterns within the data set, and was used to draw connections between participants' experiences and different types of spaces and objects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, photographs provided by participants were analyzed through content analysis (Holsti, 1969), so as to identify the types of personal objects and similarities or differences in room layouts. Where participants' responses are cited in this paper, pseudonyms have been used to ensure their anonymity. All photographs have also been reproduced with participants' approval.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is structured according to the three spatial scales examined. Participants' interview responses show that international student identity is spatially situated, as racial and cultural differences are respectively foregrounded in public and institutional spaces in the UK, and shape identity construction. This contributes to existing literature on international students' identity formation, which highlights the significance of race and culture in shaping identity, without considering how these interact with specific spaces to shape students' experiences. In addition, identity is spatially performed for others and for oneself, as room spaces and their constituent objects are actively used to construct personal identities.

Public Spaces

Racial Identities and Hypervisibility

Participants' racial identities were foregrounded in public spaces, making them hypervisible and Othered subjects. They felt that they were readily

judged on the basis of their race, or even received racial abuse, when using public spaces in UK cities.

Charlene: Sometimes it can be very threatening, and I feel very vulnerable, like I would be judged more easily for my actions or any mistakes I make here, as compared to in Singapore.

Once I was walking along the streets and someone shouted at me to “go back to China”, and I felt so attacked coz I was literally just walking along the street and minding my own business?!

Participants’ hypervisibility thus warranted their experiences of racial microaggressions (Houshmand et al., 2014; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) in public space. Participants also reflected that they only received racist remarks when alone or with other Asian students, and not when they were with white British students. This suggests that racial hypervisibility is mediated by the presence of white “normative bodies” (Puwar, 2004) in public space. Yet, none of the participants attempted to resist their Othered identities through being associated with British students, but relied instead on their own impression management strategies (discussed below).

Furthermore, participants’ experiences in public spaces in the UK and in Singapore varied substantially, thus highlighting how identity is situated in specific spaces. For instance, participants described being “out of place” in what they perceived as a “white” national landscape, and felt that their presence was constantly questioned.

Lily: I feel obviously like an outsider because I don't live there [UK] [...] everyone knows I'm not a resident there, so it's like, “what are you doing in my country?”.

Thus, participants experienced both racial Otherness as well as a sense of national Otherness in public spaces in the UK. Similarly, Yvonne explicitly compared her experiences in public spaces in Singapore and the UK.

Yvonne: We [Yvonne and her friends] just sit anywhere, you make anywhere into your own space [in Singapore], but in the UK I think if you do that with a big bunch of Asians you'll be judged like hell.

Racial privilege thus enabled participants to use public spaces in Singapore more freely and comfortably, while being part of the Asian

minority in the UK resulted in hypervisibility and Otherness in public spaces. This is not to say that Chinese Singaporean students would invariably feel displaced in public spaces in the UK, or comfortable in Singaporean public spaces tout court. Rather, participants' experiences highlight how race operates as a "floating signifier" (Hall, 1997) that interacts with different spaces to produce a spatially situated identity and sense of belonging (Conradson & McKay, 2007; Hetherington, 1998).

Participants' experiences of hypervisibility and Othering were also produced through an intersection of their gender and race in public space. For instance, Yvonne occasionally felt "intimidated" when using public spaces due to a prevailing sense of "yellow fever," wherein white men "look at you because you're Asian and they think it's exotic." Her experience exemplifies other findings on the exoticization and fetishization of Asian women (Lee, 2005; Sue et al., 2007). Such intersections of race and gender heightened safety concerns in public spaces, with many participants deliberately walking in larger groups at night or avoiding areas where drunk white men tended to gather. In this case, Manzo's (2005) suggestion that gender influences perceptions of safety in public spaces is accurate but inadequate, since it is the intersection of participants' gender *and* race in public spaces that leads to their Othered identities and perceived lack of safety.

Social interactions in public space also facilitated confluences of racial identity and national identity, with participants' racial hypervisibility contributing to the invisibility of their national identity. Hence, participants often received taunts to "go back to China." These generated feelings of "discomfort" or "strangeness," since Chinese nationals are frequently perceived to have "obnoxious habits," and "in Singapore you never associate yourself with China" (Yvonne). Such comments illustrate how participants' national identities were effaced by their racial Otherness in public space. They also echo what Lee, Jon, and Byun (2017) have referred to as neoracism, in which negative perceptions are attached to individuals' region or country of origin in addition to their race. Indeed, while Singaporean students may be marked as racially and nationally Other in UK public space, it is striking to note that they also engage actively in subtle neoracism, by Othering and distancing themselves from Chinese nationals.

Resisting Negative Identities

Participants frequently adopted strategies to challenge the negative identities ascribed to them as a result of their racial hypervisibility. As participants' behaviors were perceived to be representative of Asians in

general (Harwood et al., 2018), they enacted self-surveillance and were careful to “avoid being a bother to people or doing anything out of the ordinary” in public spaces (Charlene). While such agency is always already limited by a perceived racializing gaze (Puwar, 2004), it nonetheless exemplifies attempts at agentic impression management (Goffman, 1956), since students sought to portray a positive image that implicitly problematized negative stereotypes of Asian persons.

Participants also sought to resist ascribed identities in more direct, embodied ways. For instance, Yvonne used makeup and clothing as tools to alter her physical appearance and manage the impression she portrayed. This was a response to her feeling “more inferior” in UK public spaces because of her Asian identity. While this reflects Fanon’s (1986) notion that colonial subjects feel inferior to their white colonizers, it must be noted that she was the only participant to express a sense of inferiority.

Yvonne: If I’m dressed up and wearing makeup, I feel like I’m this hot attractive Asian girl [laughs], and I just feel very awesome and I don’t really feel inferior. [...] But if I’m not wearing makeup, I just feel like oh my gosh, I’m this nerdy Asian girl with my specs.

While this arguably leverages on Orientalist assumptions of the “exotic” Asian female (Lee, 2005), Yvonne’s practices illustrate embodied modes of resisting stereotypes that portray Asians as “nerds.” In addition, Yvonne tended to avoid eye contact with locals when walking on the streets, while Sophie described how she occasionally put her hoodie up as a way of mitigating hypervisibility and racial abuse, since “from the back you can’t tell” her race. These behavioral patterns demonstrate how the resistance of negative identities in public spaces may assume a highly embodied nature.

Institutional Spaces

Experiences of Otherness differed across types of spaces, with participants notably preferring institutional spaces to public spaces. For instance, Charlene explained that she felt more justified when using university spaces like the library. She described it as a “safe space” in which she felt “less insecurity [...] than in a really open public area,” and less “conscious of [her] identity as a foreigner.” Similarly, Sophie felt more comfortable using university spaces as compared to public spaces. In fact, she only started using public spaces when she saw other international students occupying them. These experiences suggest, contrary to Tonkiss (2005), that it is not so much

particular cities that engender or mitigate Othered identities, but the type or nature of the spaces students use.

Yet, while university spaces afforded participants with a greater sense of legitimacy, they also contributed toward participants' racial hypervisibility and individual invisibility. This supports Harwood et al. (2018)'s findings that university spaces can be considered "contradictory spaces," where racial slights may be "more hidden, but persistent and everyday" (p. 1250). In particular, participants discussed how classroom spaces and common spaces in the university foreground racial and cultural differences to shape their identities.

Hypervisibility and Invisibility in Classroom Spaces

Classroom spaces functioned as sites of racial hypervisibility for participants. For instance, Yvonne reflected on how her class participation was affected by her often being the only Asian in the classroom.

Yvonne: If I wanna talk, I'll definitely think very carefully if I talk and try not to say something stupid, because I'm Asian and I'll stick out.

You feel like whatever you say you'll attract a lot of attention and like, I don't want people to attribute it to where I come from, when it's actually what I think.

Here, hypervisibility intersects with how students are taken as representatives of their racial or ethnic group, as observed by Harwood et al. (2018) and Puwar (2004). As Yvonne feared her opinions would be perceived as representative of other Asians, she consciously managed the impression she portrayed (Goffman, 1956) by moderating the frequency and content of her class participation.

Furthermore, racial hypervisibility in classroom spaces paradoxically produces experiences of individual invisibility. This may happen when lecturers are unable to differentiate between Asian students.

Lily: [The lecturer] would look at the register and call names, and he thought my friend was me, so my friend was offended. Or he would look at the wrong person and call me, so that was offensive. I mean, just like wow, you think we're Asian, so we look the same that's why you think we're the same.

While Yeo et al. (2019) explored the experiences of Asian American students being mistaken for Asian international students, Lily's comment

highlights how international students can be mistaken for *each other*. The classroom thus becomes a space where participants' unique identities are undermined by their racial identities. Their experience in such spaces is hence one of both hypervisibility and invisibility, as other scholars have also noted (Harwood et al., 2018; Pyne & Means, 2013). This differs from the predominant experience of hypervisibility in public spaces, thus suggesting how different spaces shape students' identities in specific ways.

Similarly, individual invisibility is produced when Asian students feel that their opinions are not taken seriously. This occurred when lecturers and other British students did not understand participants' Singaporean accents.

Abigail: They tend to gloss over you or dismiss what you're saying when actually what you're saying is material.

Weiyang: No matter how fluent I am, I don't have the accent, I don't have the natural like – you don't sound as good. So I didn't really wanna speak at supervision, because everyone had the accent and everything, and I felt so, like less posh.

Here, a difference in accents resulted in experiences and perceptions of exclusion, as Kamara (2017) has highlighted. In particular, Weiyang refers to the British accent singularly as “the accent” rather than “an/their accent,” and explicitly acknowledged that she did not “sound as good.” This suggests that she may have internalized the British accent as an ideal that she could not measure up to, and possibly exemplifies Fanon's (1986) notion that (post)colonial subjects feel a sense of inferiority to the white colonizer.

These experiences highlight how identity formation is spatially situated, as classroom spaces foreground participants' racial identities and even speech patterns, while obscuring or effacing their personal identities.

Resisting Identities in Classroom Spaces

Unsurprisingly, participants sought also to resist their racial hypervisibility and individual invisibility in classroom spaces. In the latter case, participants like Abigail adopted a British accent so as to make themselves visible as competent students. Indeed, she only used a British accent when conversing with British students and lecturers, and not when she was speaking to Singaporean students or friends and family back home. Abigail thus strategically employed the “imperial language” (Puwar, 2004), or a recognized way of speaking English, to legitimize her presence in the classroom. Such verbal strategies of resistance differ from more embodied forms of impression management enacted in public spaces, as discussed

earlier. This highlights the significance of paying attention to the spatial dimension, since different spaces engender specific strategies for identity construction.

In managing racial hypervisibility, the physical layout of the classroom was also significant.

Yvonne: I guess if it's a circle, then everyone can see you. But if it's like a classroom with all facing the front then it's a bit better? Like I'll sit at the back because I don't want people to stare at me.

Interviewer: And that's because you're Asian?

Yvonne: I feel, yeah [sighs]. Very self-conscious regardless. I feel more comfortable because I know that I can see people, but people can't really see me.

Here, the material layout of classroom spaces can facilitate racial hypervisibility (circular layout), but can also be a physical resource that mitigates racial hypervisibility whenever possible (row layout). This reflects the nuanced ways in which space enables students' strategies of identity negotiation. Indeed, classroom spaces can be particularly useful sites for resisting hypervisibility, especially when facilitated by lecturers.

Weiyang: My supervisors are actually, I think like the most non-racist group of people in Cambridge [...] they basically just treat you like a normal student. So [the classroom is] where I feel like it's the most equal, I guess.

This reflects Alexander and Knowles' (2005) notion of the ambivalence of space, as the classroom becomes a site in which Othered identities are ascribed but also downplayed. As such, participants' identities and experiences are shaped through the material layouts and social interactions in classroom spaces, thus highlighting the importance of space in identity construction (Conradson & McKay, 2007).

Cultural Differences in University Common Spaces

In contrast to classroom spaces, common spaces within the university tended to emphasize cultural differences rather than racial identities. Participants described dining halls and shared kitchens as "intimidating" and "overwhelming" spaces. They perceived these as spaces of "small talk," and were challenged by a "lack of common reference points" when conversing

with British students. Common spaces thus foregrounded and made explicit cultural differences between Singaporean students and British students, and were significant in shaping how students negotiated their presentations of self (Goffman, 1956).

Weiyang: I kinda realized that when they ask, “you alright?”, they’re honestly not interested. I guess over there they’re very polite, so I also learnt to just be polite rather than too open.

Abigail: I tend to share more with a Singaporean as compared to a Brit. I’m able to act like myself when I’m with my Singaporean friends, [but with British students] I act a little differently, I think I’m a bit more reserved.

Conversely, participants may also become “more extroverted,” in response to an “expectation for you to be more sociable” in these common spaces (Rachel). As Stewart (2008) has suggested, these changes in self-presentations were a pragmatic response to the social context of common spaces, and did not stem from a perceived need to change their identities to “fit in” or “be white.”

Sophie: It [being in common spaces] makes me learn how to interact with them [British students], but I don’t really feel that upset or anything beyond that. Yeah, I don’t really care.

Weiyang: I think by the second term, I kinda didn’t wanna try to fit in anymore. Like I’m different, they know I’m different, and it’s fine.

Such acceptance of difference challenges Fanon’s (1986) notion that subjects of former colonies experience an inferiority complex relative to the white colonizer. Instead, it highlights how identity formation is spatially situated and contingent, since changes in participants’ self-presentation were made in response to situated interactions in common spaces, and participants did not perceive a need to change their personal identities in the long term.

As such, classroom spaces served to foreground participants’ racial hypervisibility. Participants adopted verbal strategies of resistance, or tried to use the physical layout of the space to minimize their hypervisibility. In contrast, interactions in common spaces emphasized cultural differences and engendered short-term changes in participants’ self-presentation. Therefore, different types of institutional space foregrounded specific kinds of social difference and catalyzed various responses, thus highlighting how students’ identities are spatially situated and constituted.

Room Spaces

An analysis of room spaces highlights how identity is spatially performed, as students constructed their identities through room layouts and personal objects. As participants had lived in more than one room in the UK since starting university, they discussed the rooms used most recently at the time of interview (during the 2016–2017 academic year). All of these rooms had been privately rented, single-occupancy rooms, with the exception of one participant who had an en-suite, single-occupancy room in her university dormitory. While students exercised some degree of agency in resisting and gaining distance from their ascribed social identities in public and institutional spaces (negative identification), it was in room spaces that they actively exercised agency in articulating their personal identities (positive identification). This finding corresponds with Hurdley's (2006) suggestion that room spaces enable self-expression.

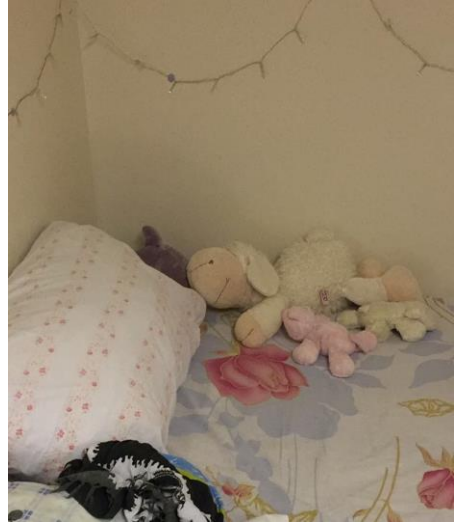
Personal objects allowed participants to “create a sense of home or like comfort for [themselves]” (Yvonne). This enabled them to construct spaces that contrasted with public and institutional spaces, in which they experienced hypervisibility or were ascribed negative identities. In this sense, participants' room spaces resemble what Harwood et al. (2018) have referred to as “counter spaces”—shared spaces within the university that participants construct, which are experienced as welcoming rather than threatening. Personal objects typically included photographs of friends and family (Figure 1), soft toys that were gifts from significant persons (Figure 2), and religious objects.

Charlene: It [her crucifix] is very comforting. It's something that I look at and feel a sense of security. And I think I'd be quite lost without it over there [UK room].

Figure 2: Photographs of Family and Friends in Rachel's UK Room



Figure 1: Soft Toys from Family and Friends in Yvonne's UK Room



In room spaces, personal objects also served as “props” (Goffman, 1961) that facilitated identity performances. For instance, as Weiyang regards family as a “core part of who [she is],” family photographs enabled her to express her identity as someone who is “very strongly attached to family” to her new friends whenever they entered her room. Beyond identity performances for others, personal objects also enabled self-directed identity performances. Since these objects provided “physical link[s]” to significant memories and experiences that constitute identity (Bachelard, 2004, p. 4), they enabled participants to maintain a sense of biographical continuity (Giddens, 1991) despite their transition to higher education abroad. For instance, Lily commented that family photographs are “a reminder of things that won’t change, even though a lot of things in [her] life are changing.” Room spaces and their constituent objects were thus actively constructed in ways that preserved participants’ sense of self-identity.

In addition, the physical layouts of participants’ room spaces were a significant tool in constructing identity. For instance, Rachel rearranged the layout of her UK room so that it mirrors the position of furniture in her Singapore room (Figures 3 and 4). This illustrates a spatial performance for herself that expressed a sense of biographical continuity, enabling her to “still know [her] placings [...] and adapt more quickly.”

Figure 4: Sketch of Rachel's Singapore Room Layout

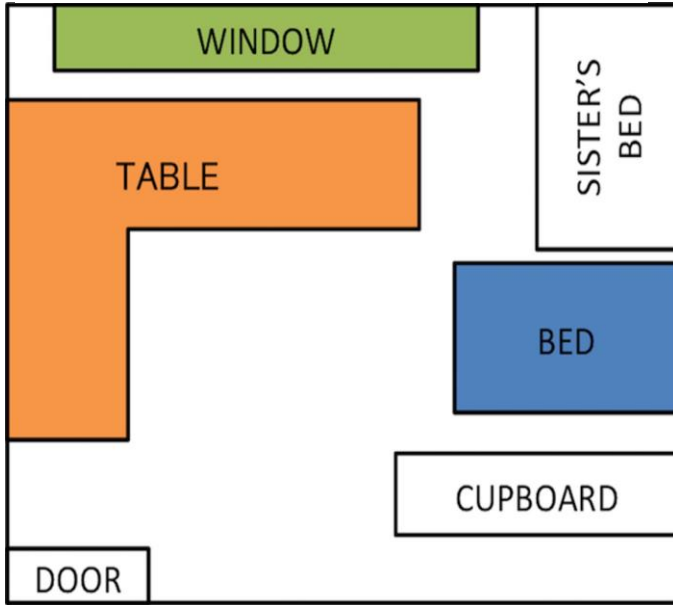
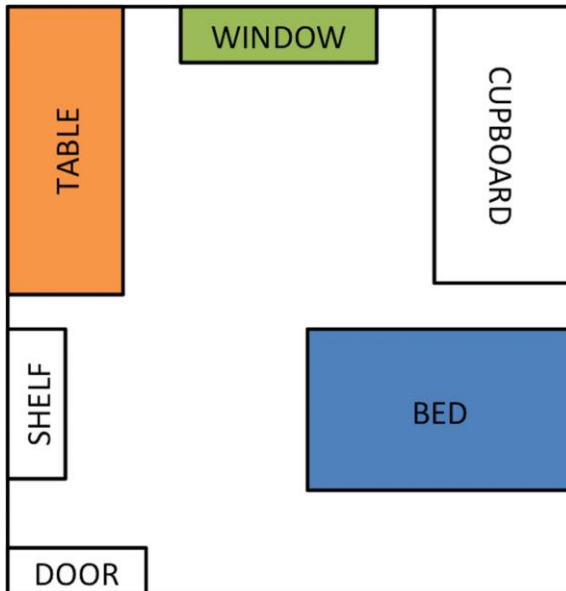


Figure 3: Sketch of Rachel's UK Room Layout



IMPLICATIONS

Conversely, participants also used room layouts to *disrupt* a sense of biographical continuity. By avoiding a similar layout in their UK room space, participants sought to indicate to themselves that a significant transition had taken place, and prime themselves for the future. For instance, Lily deliberately chose not to replicate her room layout in Singapore. She believed that this would make her “feel more homesick,” and used a different layout to remind and motivate herself that she had “left home for a reason.” As such, participants actively managed physical room layouts not only to provide a sense of continuity from the past, but also to enable an orientation to the future. This draws attention to how self-directed identity performances may emphasize rather than minimize change and transition, thus nuancing Chow and Healey’s (2008) findings. It also nuances existing research on student room spaces (Holton & Riley, 2016) by highlighting the significance of physical room layouts in identity construction.

Beyond objects and room layouts, the room space is itself also a site of identity performance and impression management. As the room is inseparably both “front” and “back” stage (Goffman, 1956), the act of giving or denying access to the room enables participants to manage the impressions they portray to others. This was clearly illustrated by Janet:

Interviewer: Do you invite friends to your room in the UK?

Janet: Nope, coz I’m a messy person, and so I don’t want them to know I’m a messy person [laughs].

Interestingly, Janet also sent sketches of her room layouts, rather than photographs of her “messy” room(s). Indeed, some participants were notably more self-conscious when discussing their room spaces, frequently asking if it was “alright” that their rooms were messy (in the photographs they sent), or if I considered certain arrangements within the room “weird.” These exchanges suggest that participants perceived their rooms as sites that had to be managed in order to portray desirable impressions of themselves to me and to friends in general.

As such, room spaces enabled participants to enact identity (dis)continuity and performance. By managing personal objects and room layouts, participants were able to exercise significantly more agency in identity construction, vis-à-vis public and institutional spaces.

CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to understand how space interacts with the identity construction of female Singaporean undergraduate students in the UK. It has found that identity is spatially situated, as participants' racial hypervisibility was foregrounded in public spaces and classroom spaces, often resulting in Othered identities and individual invisibility. Indeed, impression management strategies that participants employed to resist ascribed identities also differed across the type of space. Thus, participants used more embodied forms of resistance in public space as compared with verbal strategies or leveraging on room layouts in classroom spaces. In contrast, common spaces within the university emphasized cultural differences between participants and British students, leading participants to negotiate their presentations of self in these spaces. Finally, room spaces enabled the most agentic construction of identity, as participants used personal objects and room layouts to perform their identities to themselves and others.

By insisting on and foregrounding the significance of space, this article fills gaps in the literature on international student identity formation. While existing literature has focused on the impacts of language proficiency, cultural differences and race on international students' identity construction, it has neglected to consider how different spaces foreground these factors in specific ways. Furthermore, this article contributes to research on international student identity formation in relation to postcolonial subjects, thereby offering an angle that has yet to be explored.

In more practical terms, this research highlights the need for institutions to consider the importance of space in international student identity formation and integration, on top of existing student support services. For instance, how can the material layouts of classroom spaces be more inclusive, and encourage the participation of international students? Universities would also benefit from reviewing the design and provision of secular common spaces, in ways that enable international students to feel comfortable interacting with others. A useful first step could be to ensure that common spaces are seen as welcoming to all students rather than mainly or only to British students. This would prevent common spaces from being predominantly occupied by British students, which could unintentionally have the effect of making international students feel excluded. For instance, games in common spaces and food in dining halls could be expanded to incorporate those from non-British contexts, so as to foster inclusion and encourage cross-cultural conversation, learning, and engagement. Ultimately, common spaces in universities should be able to promote genuine communication and interaction, and need to be

planned in ways that mitigate international students' feelings of intimidation and Otherness.

Despite its contributions, however, this research has several limitations. It has a narrow scope of applicability, given that the small sample drew exclusively on the experiences of ethnic Chinese, female undergraduates. Results are thus not representative of Singaporean Malay or Indian students, who constitute the minority in both the UK and Singapore. Indeed, future research could explore how spaces in the UK and Singapore contribute to the identity construction of Malay and Indian students, and compare their experiences to those of Chinese Singaporean students. Future research could also productively consider how space shapes the identity construction of international students from other (Asian/postcolonial) backgrounds in the UK and elsewhere. Specifically, more work could also be done on male students' experiences, or on how students in shared room spaces use their rooms to construct identity. Accordingly, this paper should be seen as an initial starting point and invitation to think more critically about the connections between space and international students' identity. Given that the social is ultimately manifested "in and through place" (Malpas, 1999, p.36), I believe that engaging with social-*spatial* interactions (Massey, 1985) will prove useful in developing our understandings of international students' identity construction.

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