

# Understanding Privacy and Security Challenges of First-Generation Educational Migrants in the USA: A Proposal for Research

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## Abstract

This proposal outlines a study investigating how first-generation educational migrants in the USA perceive and experience "double presence" and "double absence" in their social media usage, focusing on the implications for their privacy and security. Double presence refers to the migrants' simultaneous engagement with their pre-migration and post-migration countries through digital means, while double absence indicates their physical absence from their pre-migration country coupled with a sense of disconnection in the post-migration country. The research aims to evaluate participants' perspectives on the positive and negative effects of social media on their security and privacy, highlighting specific risks such as surveillance, identity theft, and data exploitation. Through an examination of these factors, the study seeks to uncover potential correlations and relationships among them. Additionally, it aims to compare the experiences of newcomers with those of non-newcomers, specifically exploring how double presence and double absence affect digital security and privacy on social media platforms. Utilizing qualitative research methods, this study endeavors to offer comprehensive insights into how first-generation educational migrants navigate their digital realms, contributing to broader discussions surrounding migration, digital security, and privacy.

## 1 Introduction and Motivation

Privacy is a fundamental right for every individual, but its significance is amplified for marginalized populations, who

are often neglected in studies on privacy and security. Among these marginalized groups are migrants, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as individuals who relocate, often in search of better living conditions. An international migrant, consequently, is someone who crosses their country's borders [15]. The global trend of international migration has consistently risen in recent years, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the world population. In 2020, approximately 281 million people, constituting around 3.6% of the global population, resided in countries other than their own [1].

Migrants face numerous challenges, including social, financial, and legal issues [2, 4, 5, 12, 19]. When these challenges are combined with privacy and security vulnerabilities, the problems become even more complex [8, 10, 14, 17]. One such social problem is the concept of "double absence," as discussed by Abdulmalek Sayad [18]. This concept describes the void that migrants feel in both their pre-migration and post-migration countries. In their pre-migration country, they are absent because they have left; in the post-migration country, they are not fully integrated and thus remain somewhat absent. However, in the age of social media, migrants attempt to fill this void through their online presence, leading to the concept of "double presence." This refers to migrants maintaining a virtual presence in both their pre-migration and post-migration countries through social media [21]. Despite the importance of this phenomenon, there is a lack of research on how migrants use social media to achieve this double presence, what the privacy and security implications are, their privacy preferences, and whether their social media activity changes as a result. These areas are still underexplored in the field of usable privacy and security. Some studies have addressed related issues, such as the role of mobile phones or digital devices in maintaining cultural identity, supporting community building, and providing psychological support to migrants [11, 21, 22]. However, to date, there has been no comprehensive study focusing specifically on educational migrants in the USA to our knowledge.

Educational migrants represent a unique subgroup of international migrants. During the 2022-2023 academic year, the

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USA hosted more than one million international college students, marking an almost 12% increase from the previous year and the fastest growth rate in more than 40 years [9]. These individuals move to a new country primarily for educational opportunities and often face distinct challenges related to integration, academic pressure, and maintaining ties with their country of origin [8]. They often embark on the migration journey alone, leaving their family members in their country of origin. This contributes to heightened feelings of isolation in their new environment while maintaining strong connections to their pre-migration countries. Understanding their social media use, as well as their privacy and security concerns, is crucial since these platforms play a significant role in their daily lives. They help migrants stay connected with family and friends, access academic resources, and integrate into new social environments.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the privacy and security challenges faced by first-generation educational migrants in the USA on social media platforms, with a focus on the concepts of double presence and absence. Specifically, our research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do first-generation educational migrants in the USA experience double presence and double absence in their social media use?
- What specific privacy and security risks do these migrants face due to double presence and double absence?
- To what extent do first-generation educational migrants perceive social media as contributing positively or negatively to their security and privacy needs?
- How do the experiences of newcomers to the USA differ from those of non-newcomers regarding double presence, double absence, and their implications for digital security and privacy on social media?

## 2 Double Presence and Absence for Migrants

The concepts of double absence, introduced by Abdulmalek Sayad [18], offer a profound understanding of the migrant experience by addressing the complexities of their existence in both pre-migration and post-migration countries. Sayad's work departs from traditional sociology by emphasizing the importance of considering migrants' lives, histories, and trajectories in their countries of origin, in addition to their conditions in post-migration countries. Double absence encapsulates the spatial contradictions faced by migrants: the physical absence from their places of origin coupled with a deepening psychological and cultural distance from home [16, 18]. This state often results in a sense of liminality, where migrants find themselves straddling two worlds without complete belonging to either. In their post-migration countries, they may

encounter challenges in achieving full integration and acceptance, further exacerbating this dual absence.

In contrast, the concept of "double presence" emerges in the context of digital technology and social media, where migrants attempt to maintain connections with both their pre-migration and post-migration countries [21]. Through social media, they can participate in the cultural and social life of their pre-migration countries while simultaneously engaging with their new environment [6, 13, 21]. This dual engagement allows migrants to bridge the gap created by their physical absence, fostering a sense of belonging and identity in both locations.

Understanding the dynamics of this digital engagement is crucial for comprehending the migrant experience. It highlights the ongoing negotiation migrants must undertake to balance their identities, maintain relationships, and manage the psychological impacts of their migration journey. This dual presence across borders allows migrants to bridge geographical and cultural gaps, fostering continuity in their identities and relationships. However, this digital connectivity also brings about unique privacy and security risks. The dual nature of migrants' online presence significantly heightens their susceptibility to identity theft and fraud. Personal information shared across borders becomes more accessible to malicious actors who exploit transnational identities for financial gain. Moreover, data exploitation presents a pervasive threat to migrants' privacy rights. Their digital footprints, which contain sensitive personal data, are vulnerable to exploitation by various entities, including governments, corporations, and cybercriminals. Exploring these phenomena within the context of migrants' social media usage, and understanding the evolution of their privacy preferences and security concerns, presents a compelling topic for researchers.

## 3 Methods: Proposal

Since we are following a qualitative research approach, our methodology begins with a comprehensive literature review. The next steps involve recruiting participants and conducting interviews. Finally, we will analyze the data using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying patterns and themes related to double presence, double absence, and digital security. The following subsections provide further details of each step:

### 3.1 Literature Review: Step 1

The first step of our study is conducting a comprehensive literature review. We have already initiated a systematic review and have gathered more than 80 relevant papers to date. This review covers literature from 2013 to 2024, allowing us to capture a broad spectrum of developments and insights over the past decade. In this process, we are meticulously reviewing papers that address various aspects of migration, such as social, legal, and cultural dimensions [2, 8, 19, 20].

However, our primary focus is specifically on the intersection of privacy and security issues with migrants' social media usage experiences. This focus is critical because it helps us understand how migrants navigate their online presence and manage their personal information in the digital space, which is often overlooked in broader migration studies.

By examining existing research, we aim to identify key patterns, themes, and gaps in the current understanding of how first-generation educational migrants use social media, the privacy and security challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to mitigate these challenges. This literature review will provide a solid foundation for our subsequent research phases, including participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. It will also help us refine our research questions and methodology to ensure they are grounded in the current academic discourse and address the most pressing issues faced by this population.

## 3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews: Step 2

After the literature review, we will focus on the recruitment and semi-structured interviewing process. We aim to recruit both newcomer and non-newcomer first-generation educational migrants, encompassing undergraduate and graduate students, across the USA for this study. We specifically target this group because they often migrate alone, with their family members remaining in their country of origin, leading to greater feelings of loneliness in the new land while maintaining stronger ties to their pre-migration countries [8, 20]. This dynamic will help us understand their need to maintain a presence in both their pre and post migration countries through social media, what they share and why, and their perceptions of privacy and security concerns when sharing online.

The first author, being an international student herself, has a broad network of educational migrants in the USA, which we will leverage to recruit participants for our study. Once recruited, we will schedule in-person interviews in comfortable settings such as campus utility labs or well-known coffee shops, depending on the participants' preferences.

During the interviews, we will ask questions related to their migration journey, social media usage, and any privacy and security concerns they may have. To structure the interviews, we will begin with an introduction to explain the purpose and obtain informed consent. Gathering background information will follow, focusing on demographic details and migration history. We will then explore their experiences with privacy and security, including instances where they felt compromised. Discussions will also cover the impact of these issues on their daily lives, mental health, and overall well-being. Finally, we will discuss mitigation strategies, exploring measures they have taken or suggest to protect their privacy and security. Some sample questions are given below:

- Can you describe any instances where you felt your privacy was compromised due to your migration status?

- How do you manage your online presence and communication with family and friends in your pre-migration country?
- Have you experienced security threats, such as identity theft or fraud, since migrating?
- How have these privacy and security issues affected your mental health and well-being?
- What measures do you think could help improve the privacy and security of migrants like yourself?

The number of participants will be determined by data saturation [3]; we will continue interviewing until we reach this point.

## 3.3 Data Analysis: Step 3

After data collection, we will analyze the gathered information using thematic analysis [7] to discern patterns and themes related to double presence, double absence, and digital security. Thematic analysis involves systematically coding data, grouping codes into themes that encapsulate significant aspects of participants' experiences, and refining these themes through iterative review. This analysis will yield insights into how first-generation educational migrants navigate their online presence, manage privacy concerns, and negotiate their identities across multiple cultural contexts. By uncovering these nuances, our study aims to inform future research directions, policy development, and practical interventions to support migrants in their social media usage and enhance their digital security.

## 4 Future Work

Our immediate next step involves conducting the study to gather empirical data on the unique privacy and security vulnerabilities faced by first-generation educational migrants due to the phenomenon of double presence. Through rigorous data collection and analysis, we aim to identify specific challenges and risks these migrants encounter in their online interactions across borders.

Upon identifying these vulnerabilities, our focus will shift to developing targeted technological solutions aimed at minimizing these risks. These solutions will be crafted in collaboration with social media platforms and technological experts to enhance digital privacy protections for migrant populations. Simultaneously, we will engage actively with policymakers to advocate for informed policy measures that address the identified vulnerabilities and promote safer online environments for migrants. This collaboration aims to translate our research findings into actionable policy recommendations that prioritize the digital security and privacy rights of first-generation educational migrants.

Expanding our research beyond first-generation educational migrants to include other migrant groups will allow us to capture a broader spectrum of experiences and challenges. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, including insights from social sciences, law, and technology, we seek to develop holistic strategies that address the multifaceted issues at the intersection of migration and digital security. Ultimately, our goal is to foster a safer, more inclusive online environment that respects and protects the digital rights of migrants globally. Through these efforts, we aspire to contribute to meaningful changes in policy, technology, and practice that support migrant communities in navigating their digital lives securely and confidently.

## 5 Conclusion

Our project holds interdisciplinary significance across various fields including migration studies, social computing, digital sociology, cybersecurity, privacy, and human-computer interaction. We aim to offer insights and tools to support first-generation educational migrants in navigating social media securely and meaningfully. This study identifies critical areas for further exploration and action. Firstly, we aim to develop targeted interventions and policies that address the unique privacy and security challenges faced by migrants with double presence in their digital lives. Secondly, our research opens avenues for enhancing understanding and support systems for migrant communities, fostering a safer online environment globally. The underexplored intersection of migration, identity, and digital technology holds immense potential for further exploration. We aim to foster engagement with scholars and practitioners through workshops to gather valuable feedback and identify avenues for future research and development. Ultimately, our endeavor contributes to the well-being and digital empowerment of educational migrants.

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