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# Co-opted Marginality in a Controlled Media Environment: The Influence of Social Media Affordances on the Immigration Discourse

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An emerging narrative on social media challenges the premise that the repertoire against immigrants is caused by xenophobia. We identify and propose the phenomenon of co-opted marginality, or the claims of being victimized by dominant groups that are not conventionally at the margin. We examine how a controlled media environment in Singapore influences citizens ( $n=36$ ) who claim co-opted marginality when expressing anti-immigrant sentiments online. We further investigate the role of the social media techno-structure in encouraging interactions with this discourse. Contrary to prior literature, we find that social media affordances, such as curation and identification, can discourage citizens from actively engaging with prejudicial and discriminatory language while facilitating the emergence and maintenance of discursive strategies such as co-opted marginality, which conform to contextual normative constraints.

CCS CONCEPTS • Collaborative and Social Computing

**Additional Keywords and Phrases:** social media, affordances, identification, curation, anti-immigrant discourse, xenophobia

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Scholars have often pointed to social media as a breeding ground for deviant and problematized behavior, like hate speech or prejudicial attitudes [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]. Atlantic editor Jeffrey Goldberg's opinion about social media as "a cesspool for antisemites, homophobes, and racists" has its adherents [6]. This supports recurrent allegations that individuals do not follow normal rules of social conduct online, thus being more likely to exacerbate intergroup tensions [6, 7,8]. Citron (2014) argues that social media places a physical distance between speaker and audience, emboldening anonymous individuals to express prejudices with less fear of repercussions [9].

Researchers have increasingly observed the diverse and creative ways used to disseminate prejudiced-laden ideologies online. In many cases, the online socio-structure helps individuals express covert racism or negative attitudes towards outgroups while avoiding condemnation and reaching audiences more successfully [10,11]. Faulkner & Bliuc (2016) investigated the use of moral disengagement strategies to justify racist behavior in the online responses to notable racist incidents in Australia [12]. Such strategies enable individuals that were socialized to adopt specific moral standards to violate them without experiencing negative emotions such as shame or self-condemnation [13].

However, this radical role of social media in facilitating prejudicial and racist discourse is disputed. Lately, narratives have been emerging on social media, challenging the premise that the negative repertoire toward immigrants should not just be seen as the expression of individuals' discriminatory

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views or the articulation of unjust systems of power against minorities. There is a trend whereby presumed privileged groups of citizens express negative sentiments toward immigrants via a language that points to the fear of being victimized, losing status, or not benefiting from societal support as much as immigrants. We call these claims co-opted marginality, defined as a discourse practiced by individuals who, despite being conventionally located in majority groups (e.g., whites, citizens), describe themselves as marginalized.

The concept of co-opted marginality online may also be linked to a desire to avoid social rather than self-sanction following the violation of community norms. The discourse articulates a dominant group's shared perception of being marginalized or pushed aside in the community [14]. Scholars have consistently reported, notably when considering immigrants, occurrences of groups who claim marginalization while their actual position would not appear to substantiate such a stance, for example, British National Front party members [15] or Trump supporters [16]. In South Korea, the Ban-Damunhwa formed by young self-identified progressives expresses anti-immigrant sentiments during peer-to-peer exchanges on social media while rejecting the neoliberal ethics of fairness, which they believe advantages immigrants and marginalizes citizens who find themselves struggling with precarity [17,18].

We contend that the twin roles of the socio-cultural context and the online socio-structure (in this study, social media) in encouraging one or the other form of discourse deserves more significant consideration. Further, we question whether social media affordances intensify, tame, or disguise expressions of prejudiced discourse, to ensure more effective diffusion. We do so in the context of Singapore; a city-state premised historically on immigration and where immigrants constitute not only a significant proportion of the populace but are considered a crucial sociopolitical and policy issue.!

## 2 STRATEGIC DISCOURSE: CO-OPTED MARGINALITY

Public discourse online is strongly shaped by the broader socio-cultural context. Theories linked to a pragmatic critique of domination [19] suggest that situated and relational subjectivities are fashioned through interactions with the discourse of the dominant class in society. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) maintain that majoritarian groups impose on everyone positions that correspond to their values and interests [20]. Cultural elites, for example, are reportedly sympathetic toward minorities and groups evolving at the margins of power [19]. From such a standpoint, anti-immigrant discourse is often condemned by the mainstream media or the political elite [21, 22,23].

Arguably, given the risks of facing a backlash, strategies used to convey and recruit adherents to reactionary ideologies have morphed into an increasingly sophisticated and unassuming discourse [24, 25]. Indeed, the explicit discourse used by extremist groups toward recruiting target individuals, including blatant racist comments traditionally seen as a device to strengthen convictions around ingroup membership, is increasingly restrained. Micro-aggressions are almost undetectable [26] but present high toxicity and potency in denigrating the struggles of rewriting history in favor of minorities [27]. Promoters of prejudices tend to trivialize, denigrate, and even deny the existence of discriminatory language [28,29].

The Simon Wiesenthal Center's Digital Hate and Terrorism project (2019) has linked the increase of hate groups on the internet with increasingly complex and hidden messaging [30]. While the discursive strategies used online by prejudice-laden users when presenting their views have received considerable

interest [31,32], some scholars have pointed to an unresearched set of subtle rhetorical and cognitive strategies, visible online, that make prejudiced behavior towards minorities acceptable and justifiable [33].

Co-opted marginality may offer a narrative device that makes condemnable attitudes both expressible and appropriate for public expression, thereby more likely to be heard and effective. Therefore, the rhetoric of marginality can be co-opted, effectively re-directed, and re-articulated for effects opposite to the original application. Assuming marginality attracts sympathetic considerations [34], co-opted marginality and its victimization frame may serve as a discursive strategy to making what looks like prejudice-loaded or xenophobic claims more agreeable, thus flipping the discourse (“we are not oppressors / we are victimized; we are not anti-foreigner / we are suffering”). Arguably, the emergence of co-opted marginality is linked to how socio-cultural discourses which contain elements of problematized group consciousness (racism and xenophobia) interact with the social media environment. The possibility depends on how individuals who wish to publicly share grievances that are condemned by government policies, via tight media controls, and socio-cultural norms, interact with the social media technostucture.

### 3 ANTI-IMMIGRANT DISCOURSE IN SINGAPORE

Since its heyday as a colonial trading post, Singapore has sustained an open-door policy for immigrants, historically relying on importing skilled and semi-skilled foreign workers to achieve the twin goals of economic development and social welfare. Over the past two decades to 2018, Singapore’s total population grew by over 40% to some 5.6 million, mainly through immigration [35]. Unlike most other immigration-prone nations, Singapore is distinctly multicultural and multiracial. As a former British colony and a “polyglot migrant world” built by migrants from East, Southeast, and South Asia, Singapore is truly a “child of diaspora” [36, p.359]. The diverse but common ethnicity between Singaporean citizens and its immigrants is unique and adds a layer of complexity to the locals’ feelings toward them [37, 38, 39].

The authorities portray immigrants as an economic imperative [40], reliant on attracting talented individuals, commonly named “foreign talents.” While this has successfully contributed to the flourishing economy, the development has impacted the nation’s social fabric. Singapore’s diverse ethnic population has led to strict multiculturalist policies that rely on the embeddedness of cultural identity in a non-threatening social climate [41]. The effort is supported by laws restricting any expression that would disrupt racial and religious harmony (Section 298 of the Penal Code). For example, a young pregnant Japanese Australian received a 10-month jail sentence in 2016 for posting on “the real Singapore” website articles allegedly intended to incite ethnic hatred [42].

Social media has been depicted to shake the carefully calibrated political arrangement slowly, and antagonistic voices have since emerged, bypassing a tightly controlled media environment [43]. Singaporeans denounce the lack of equal opportunities vis-à-vis foreigners. The perceived rise and prominence of foreign talents have triggered anxieties, with some calling themselves “second class citizens” converging on social media to vent their frustration [44]. The Facebook groups “SGOpposition” and “Concerned Citizens Band Together for a better Singapore” abound in posts of personal stories lamenting how foreigners are privileged. Community news sites on social media (Mothership, Stomp, etc.) often feature self-entitled and well-off foreigners that disrespect local norms [45]. According to the local Singapore press: “on social media, many studies have shown that in this era of fake news, it is often the hateful pieces that feed racism and xenophobia that do well and spread quickly” [46].

The fear of the deteriorating quality of public discourse online led to the adoption of governmental measures, including anti-immigrant rhetoric being firmly condemned. In April 2019, legal restrictions were implemented, claiming to serve the public interest and protect society damaged by online falsehoods via the Protection Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill. POFMA was presented as the first-ever effort garnered by a national government to regulate the social media sphere [47]. During the Covid circuit breaker period, a member of parliament received a stern warning from the police force after she posted a tweet about an incident involving foreigners who were caught on camera while ignoring safe distancing rules. The MP's comments' quick rebukes exemplified Singapore's strong normative and political restraint of anti-immigrant discourse [46].

#### **4 SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES: INTENSIFYING OR MODERATING PREJUDICES**

Understanding the outcome of the interactions of discourses with the social media environment has led to extensive works on the role of the online socio-structure on polarization, whereby users are more inclined to be exposed to a streamlined, filtered narrative that generates increased hostility towards the non-similar point of views [40]. Although highly discussed, the allegation that online socio-structure drives interactional polarization in echo chambers has received little empirical support [50,51,52]. The validity of the concerns over filter bubbles and echo chambers is routinely questioned [53, 54]. Although recent studies have shown variation among social media platforms, accentuated on Twitter but less evident on Facebook or WhatsApp [55] there is, to date, little tangible evidence of heightened homophilic interactional patterns online. The online socio-structure may promote exposure to an increased variety of discourses [ 56,57].

Still, social media affordances have been reported to encourage social clustering around specific discourses [58]. Affordances are technological-based features whose analytical role is to depict the result of the interaction between the techno socio-structure and a user. Affordances include the ability to have asynchronous discussions, more visible communication, and production of editable long-lasting communication trails [59] - often referred to as hyper textuality that facilitates discursive-material interactions across spaces and times [60]. They also allow to navigate information hierarchically [61,62] or participate in public conversation anonymously [63, 64]. Facebook has shown how affordances may impact how individuals interact with specific discourses. "Angry" emoji reactions can yield up to five times the weight and attention given to "likes," heuristic leverage used by Facebook to position posts tagged with angry emojis in prime positions on the newsfeed [65]. The priority given to angry emojis has allegedly heightened "toxic," divisive content and misinformation on the platform. Hillmann & Trier (2012) have also found that sentiments embedded in the text can contribute to the emergence of a network of like-minded individuals, possibly triggering homophilic tendencies [66].

This paper focuses on curation and identification to analyze whether affordances of the online socio-structure impact the intensity or the formulation of anti-immigrant rhetoric online: does it amplify, dampen or modify it?

Curation is an affordance that allows the creation and posting of personal content, the reception, sorting, and recirculating of content made by others. Curation is usually considered as generating heuristic cues of social endorsements that can capture interpersonal meanings at a higher order of abstraction [67, 68]. New media scholars have scrutinized curation for its influence on incidental news exposure or

engagement [69, 70–71]. Social curation practices impact other users’ willingness to engage with information; most users notice information if pointed to by friends/contacts that share or recommend it [72]. Curation via the sorting of digital assets such as links in tweets, hashtags, reposting, or retweeting has also been linked to the construction of the anti-immigrant public [1,73]. For example, during the 2016 American presidential election campaign, Trump’s fan base gathered online around curated and “deployed racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic memes and tropes developed by ‘alt-right’ white nationalists” to become “a sort of weaponized, automated effective public” [73, p. 201].

Similarly, identification, the ability to reveal or not identify cues, is said to be a major factor leading to hostile and polarized exchanges [74]. Although asynchronous communication complicates identification, it can be observed via features such as friends’ connections and network associations, profile descriptions, or hashtag uses [75]. Most of all, social identification can be conveyed in the language and discourse used during online exchanges. Many anti-immigrant communities are constituted and maintained through linguistically creative means that facilitate high shareability and generate expressions of affective identity that structure a matrix for a community online [76, 77]. Accordingly, identification online can be conspicuous and noticeable in rhetorical or discursive elements emerging during interactions online. De Saint Laurent and colleagues (2020) have shown how users who share anti-immigrant sentiments on Twitter deliberately use distinctive words and slogans to consolidate a like-minded community [77]. Racist groups deploy specific linguistic devices to raise group consciousness using specific lexis, such as words attached to the moral principles of the group [11].

In summary, affordances (curation, identification) influence how discourse interacts with the social media environment. They are often scrutinized under the presumptions that they are factors of increased salience of prejudiced discourse online. Our study investigates how the social media affordances intersect with socio-political norms to shape problematized discourse towards immigrants. We specifically inquire about the role of social media affordances of curation and identification mechanisms in the salience of anti-immigrant discourse.

## 5 METHOD

Participants were recruited on social media from Reddit, Facebook community sites, and Hardware Zone, noting comments in threads on immigration and foreigners. Interviews were conducted over a year. The interview phase coincided with the Covid 19 pandemic circuit breaker. Interviewing was therefore conducted both offline (before circuit breaker), and online, which retrospectively helped the quality of the exchanges as participants seemed more comfortable sharing their experiences online. Conversations online went, on average, for longer.

Participants were informed of their rights, provided written consent, and were compensated with an honorarium (US\$15). In-person interviews conducted in English lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. The age distribution was over-represented by individuals in their twenties and thirties (70%), while socio-professional groups were varied. Participants identified as Chinese (69%), Malay (14%), Indian (11%), and Others (6%), comparable to the ethno-racial distribution in Singapore (76.2%, 15%, 7.4%, 1.4%). Participants were asked about their experience with immigrants and foreigners and the information consumed on social media. Respondents are given pseudonyms, respecting their ethnicity, in the analysis for

confidentiality. The same identifier for the same individual was varied throughout to avoid re-identification.

Table 1: Background characteristics of the sample (N=36)

<i>Gender</i>	Female	20	Male	16		
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Chinese	25	Malay	4	Indian	4
<i>Occupation</i>	Employed	19	Unemployed	5	Student	10
<i>Recruitment</i>	Hardware Zone	9	Reddit	8	Facebook	7

When referring to social media, we point to the socio-structure as an online site for public interaction where anyone can produce content and choose when and whom to present it based on Carr & Hayes (2015) [78]; these include SNS, public community forums, WhatsApp, and other platforms of reciprocal and public virtual engagement.

The fact that a non-Singaporean led most of the interviews requires caution in analyzing the data as it may have dampened the negative rhetoric about immigrants among interviewees. Previous scholars have argued that being an insider during social interviewing may paradoxically draw more explicitly social divisions [79]. The interviewer’s position as an outsider can offer a nonpartisan channel for voicing authentic and subjective views and less anguish in sharing politically charged opinions.

The qualitative approach allowed for assessing interviewees’ subjective understandings of how social media participates in their everyday experiences of differentiation with foreigners. The interview data were transcribed into 970 pages of interview content and were analyzed using QDAminer analytical software to ease data management, keyword searching, data summary, and the coding process. Thematic analysis was conducted to capture and interpret meanings in the data [80] from respondents’ different views.

## 6 FINDINGS

We found that socio-cultural restrictions seemed to supersede the influence of affordances linked to the online socio-structure; despite the possibility of being anonymous or hidden, respondents self-censor and constrain active posting on social media platforms. Generally, respondents suggest they do not trust mainstream or social media; they view the public sphere as a place for guarded self-expression when race-related. Respondents traded anti-immigrant rhetoric based on race or xenophobia with a discourse that expresses their feelings of being marginalized by foreigners. The affordances of identification and curation push problematized discourse to the margin of the public sphere.

### 6.1 Contradictory views of the Controlled Online Public Sphere

The quality of the online public sphere generated ambivalent and mixed feelings among participants. Tai Loong quickly referred to the low news media freedom index that placed Singapore at an unfavorable 158 position, “*We are worse than Iran!*” with some attributing it to institutionalized policies. “*Surveillance is very high, right. We have very high censorship,*” explained Nadia, a young Malay student.

It has been widely reported that the PAP government has opted for a “light-touch” approach to regulating the internet [81]. Censorship is not explicit, and dissent is not overtly repressed but is controlled via a complex mix of laws and practices to rein in expressions in the media [82]. In Char Bor’s view, a government employee, “*you have freedom of expression in Singapore; it’s just that there are certain*

lines you should not cross.” Still, many respondents refer to government policies that affect users’ online engagement, the POFMA bill, which makes the unsupported publishing of information online liable, and the possibility of committing a criminal act governs users’ perceptions and limits their actions. Aahva shares that “*this usually happens on a current affair or national topic. They’re wary of getting a POFMA notice*”. Others make conjectures about the government’s digital policies, such as hiring social media consultants to counter criticisms about government policies in online comments [82]. Tai Loong shares speculation about social media as being under surveillance:

*“I need to bring in the element of this thing called IB, which is the internet brigade. By and large, as an academic, you would say that this is perhaps a conspiracy, but I know for a fact that they exist... So, there’s speculation that there are people who get hired to do all these things. Yeah, that’s something I believe in. Yeah, but I have no proof.”*

In such a socio-political context, posting or commenting becomes ‘a waste of time’, a “waste of energy,” or, for Elliott, to be avoided because of a lack of “sufficient knowledge.” Interviewees claim to “fish” for news on online forums, read articles and posts, and share them with friends but remain reluctant to engage as content producers. Desmond explains his attitude toward posting online:

*“Food reviewers were getting in trouble at restaurants because they gave a bad reviews. So, if something as minor as this, you get into trouble. There’s nothing wrong with me sharing a piece of news. You can’t fault me for sharing a piece of news. But you can fault me if I make an unfair comment. You see. So rather not comment.”*

Paradoxically, despite being considered under surveillance, social media was commonly described as a site where individuals engage in deviant behaviors, with Facebook unanimously singled out as a polarizing environment. Some respondents point to “keyboard warriors, or as Brenda claimed, ‘a body of anonymous, faceless online actors with no purpose but to create disharmony’”. She remarked that she sees ‘ugly fighting’ and toxicity spreading when browsing and consuming news on Facebook feeds of local sites such as Crime Library Singapore, Kaypoh Singapore, and Mothership.

*‘They have no message, no purpose. It is all about trash... I’m not being serious. I may have a lot of emojis, yeah. So... I may not blatantly say out anything ... but I didn’t trash the government what. Okay. So you can basically express negativity without saying anything... I’m just being a keyboard warrior here; they just creep up on you eventually. So, that’s how I feel about social media. They come and create some troubles here and there... It’s just so outrageous. It’s just crazy.’*

Interviewees’ position about public conversations on social media reveals deep contradictions; it is viewed both as a valued place for information validation and a toxic, untrustworthy site for deliberation. While barely engaging in active roles online, some interviewees acknowledge the collective value of the messages received from social media community sites as a form of information validation, as elaborated upon by Riya, “*Oh, I love reading the comments because that shows me the diversity of [what] Singaporeans can really think.*” Nadia refers to a Twitter account, “*Ikan Sambat,*” whose “*tweets about controversial issues, in a very transparent way ... offer a different and refreshing take on certain topics news outlets just hush-hush*”.



Unpacking how participants interact with the socio-structure's affordances when engaging with public discourse highlights this paradox. Affordances supporting participatory communication online, i.e., curation and identification, appear to limit more than exacerbate the spread of discourses about immigrants in conformity to the conventions set by the socio-cultural environment.

## 6.2 Curation: Taming the expression of problematized discourse

Curation helps users organize, classify, validate, and ultimately hierarchize information in the community. Jayden explains how he relies on curation when considering issues about immigrants. The aggregated number of comments and reactions are social cues that signal reliable, truthful, and important facts.

*“On online forums, I see a lot of people complaining. I noticed this trend of people complaining about their life, about their work, complaining about their salary... And what I can say is that if they keep complaining in a way that immigrants impacted their lives, it actually tells me that foreigners are here to snatch their jobs. It's just that I haven't experienced it yet. But the fact that they are complaining about it for years, then I believe that something is not right, I believe that's the way ... why Singaporeans are angry.”*

The practice appears even institutionalized as Yi Jie explains how information cues are turned into a signaling indicator, the DTF index, commonly used on some online communities like Hardware Zone. DTF stands for Din Tai Fung, a famous Cantonese restaurant known for congregating long queues at lunch or dinner time. These queues are hard information and non-manipulable proof that something is happening for real, such as lunch or dinner time. Transposed to news circulating online, social media users judge the reliability and truthfulness of the content they are exposed to by swapping their meta-physical quality (what is true) with meta-social curated knowledge (what others believe is true). Authenticity and credit attributed to stories online are measured by collective reactions that, through the use of digital assets such as likes, links in comments, hashtags, upvotes, reposting, or retweeting, sort and point to what is important. For Lydia, *“On Reddit, it's easier to see what is contentious, and it's easier to follow the conversation; you get what is more discussed, how it is discussed. If a comment is upvoted, you know that it will be the message everyone is going to be seeing. On Twitter, it's also easier to get what everyone is agreeing on.”* One form of curation also involves influencers, such as the blogger Xiaxue, whom Nadia claims *“actually talked about her past experiences with migrant workers and she was openly sharing her outlook and her thoughts about migrant workers online. And if you know, she has a very big, big following.”*

However, curated content seems embedded in the normative norms of the online community sites, which encourages participants to tame their rhetoric to conform to prevalent cultural norms. Lydia explains how her motivations to discuss spontaneously specific topics are affected by the normalizing pressure of the online community she evolves in:

*“It sucks when you post, and you don't get a reply, and worse when you realize you just get a downvote because nobody wants to argue with you anymore—throwing my opinion out there. Sometimes I just get downvoted to hell. So, yeah, then I will know this opinion is not popular in this community. And then I'll be wondering, what does this community stand for?”*

Yi Ling is also conscious of the normalizing influence of curation, noting that *“no one is going to go on to Reddit and say I'm a racist. It's something like I would hear people in my social circle say it in real*

life, though". Aahava agrees that her participation in online community sites is guarded to fit the expectations of her peers online:

*"I'm one of the more vocal online among the people that I know. Offline, they do voice it [their discontent], ... [online] you want to be cautious about what you're saying. And not just because the government could get you or someone could, you know, sue you but also just in terms of accountability and how people think about me ... we also want people who know us only via internet interactions to think well of us. So, there is that level of restraint as well."*

The participants generally present mechanisms based on the sorting of information and the hierarchization of discourse via digital markers as discouraging discourses that challenge the dominant norms, including xenophobic or racist rhetoric. Curation emphasizes the restrictions linked to the socio-political norms and the dominant cultural values. Arguably, not all participants share experiences of online communities that are subjected to normalizing dynamics; specific community-centric sites are reported to elicit identification processes that, in contrast, and at first glance, appear to encourage seditious content.

### **6.3 Identification: Pushing problematized discourse at the margin**

Participation in social media forums can lead to everyday acts by which people activate, define, or frame symbolic boundaries. Identification is activated in informal discourse by markers such as that found in terminologies and speech patterns on certain social media platforms. Such boundary work is at its most explicit in the Hardware Zone online community. Lydia describes it as *"the purest form of an online community in Singapore like the oldest form around"*. The forum extensively uses specific symbols, which amounts to what Aava considers as *"not English. They tend to focus on the Singlish creole instead ... it's an in-speak"*. The terminologies are so particular that non-members, such as foreigners but also local Singaporeans, do not fully comprehend them. Alex explains that *'Hardware Zoners have their language; it's not even Singlish [local dialect]. If you don't use those languages correctly, I would know you're not one of us.'* The parlance is so particular that *'the hardware zone lingo, such as BBFA, it's a joke. It means "Bui Bui forever alone". Bui Bui means fat and obese. It refers to somebody who is too salty and doesn't listen, someone too negative, too radicalized. It's a way to say ignore the person.'*

Respondents also describe how Hardware Zoners commonly use sarcasm and humor with *"silly remarks; then it will go viral ah"* or provocation to establish boundary systems that define and frame belonging to the group. These forms of identification are fertile ground for prejudice-loaden exchanges. Gabrielle observes a lot of negative instantiations of group framing: *"It's like, I just scroll a bit, and then I just see something anti-female already. I'm like, okay, never mind. Or someone sexualizing someone, okay. It's just that community."* In terms of immigration sentiment, Azri claims, *"that's where you could see a lot of anti-foreign Talents. You can see a lot of sagas being discussed there"*. The sarcastic tone is meant to detach words from their true meaning, making prejudicial language tolerable. For Tai Loon, a regular visitor to the site, no statement should be taken at face value, as such, *"Facebook is more toxic than Hardware Zone. On Facebook, some of the comments, the radical wordings, they mean it. On Hardware Zone, I need to filter out satire"*.

The identification strategy, enacted in forums like Hardware Zone, enables members to confront government-sponsored narratives, particularly about controversial topics, whilst limiting the discourse to a

small circle of the initiated. Strong identification blatantly encourages boundary work and fully engages with xenophobia and anti-immigrant discourse; it also keeps such discourse at the margin of the public sphere by discouraging non-members from engaging with it.

Both identification and curation afford participatory communication online; they also initiate sterilizing processes of discourse in the online socio-structure, limiting engagement and validation of negative rhetoric about immigrants. Affordances that should emancipate actors online are retraining and pushing seditious content away from the center of the debates, entrenching the compliance of the online public sphere. It appears that more than relying on affordances of the online techno-structure, participants share and communicate their frustrations about immigrant “Others” via creative discourses.

Overall, respondents’ experiences indicate that forms of anti-immigrant discourse interact differently with the social media platforms. Anti-immigrant discourse containing elements proscribed by the dominant cognitive structures is likely to be visible in pockets of community sites that emulate identification mechanisms in ways that push their views to the fringe of the public sphere. On the other hand, the normalizing role of curation is noticeable, encouraging a language devoid of racist or polarizing slurs.

#### **6.4 Co-opted marginality: Circumventing the normalizing influence of social media**

Individuals who participate in collaborative practices online (e.g., curation) may facilitate the circulation of discourse that resonates with the audience while respecting the norms imposed by the authority. In such a context, social media platforms help create a dressed and framed discourse to address frustrations in agreement with the normative environment. Co-opted marginality is allegedly such a legitimate discourse.

*“You do not find people talking about race,”* according to Kyle, but sentiments towards immigrants are often evoked via the widespread anxiety of Singaporeans becoming “second class.” The idea that citizens are being marginalized is noticeably articulated among interviewees, such as Tai Loong:

*“Culturally speaking, sometimes, as a Singaporean, I feel I’m the one being discriminated against ... as a worker, as an employee, I sometimes will feel discriminated against”.*

Co-opted marginality emerges as an unabashed discourse about immigrants, with citizens expressing a double squeeze from both ends of the class structure. At the upper end, the inflow of foreign talents (i.e., skilled foreigners) has generated a perception that locals face an uneven playing field. As described by TP, a hedge-fund manager, *“the consensus is that we are second-class ... feel marginalized. Why? A lot of these foreigners have a degree from Harvard, but if I graduate from NUS, even if you’re the best, you can’t really compete.”* Citing the example of an Indian national appointed as chairman of a national bank, Desmond reflects, *“my general sentiment is that authorities are very quick to give foreign talents the benefit of the doubt and treat them better than ourselves.”*

At the lower end of the society, respondents report multiple instances where they felt disregarded and disrespected by foreigners, triggering unpleasant feelings of inadequacy, even from modest, low-skilled immigrants. As noticed by Tai Loong:

*“This is hard to digest, but foreign workers sometimes look down on us. Singaporeans who work in retail are usually the ones who are not very successful academically. So, their standard of English is not strong. I do recall; sometimes, Filipino staff were laughing at a sales associate’s lack of English proficiency”.*

Elliott believes “Singaporeans are just not good enough,” a view Aisha is more explicit about, “Singaporeans can take things for granted. Hence, they might be lazier or expect a higher salary. On the other side, immigrants expect a lot lesser, but they are willing to do so much more”. Brenda exemplifies the tendency to rationalize negative sentiments toward minorities by referring to a situation that is imposed on her, diffusing responsibilities to an unfair situation.

*“This is the only place we can call home. If we’re being outcasted, or we’re being kicked out, then where can we go? Even though we are accepting of it, but we still feel a little bit threatened. Like I guess, we are slowly becoming the minorities.”*

From a strategic angle, the negative rhetoric against foreigners is not necessarily seen as symptomatic of citizens’ brush with anti-foreigner discourse; migrants are not the direct target of their anxieties. Rather the rhetoric reframes the anti-immigrant rhetoric as a morally justified claim. Via co-opted marginality, the pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable and portrayed as morally worthy for Singaporeans as a whole. Co-opted marginality claimants inverse the direction of discrimination, an act of transvaluation [83]. Locals are not the perpetrators of prejudices; instead, they suffer from them. Framed as a moral injustice, anti-immigrant sentiments can be more easily defended and supported in the online public sphere.

## **7 DISCUSSION**

This study analyzes how individuals interact with the socio structure when talking about immigrants in a controlled media environment. The findings raise two interesting points.

First, our analysis supports the extant literature on the influence of affordances on social media; it also highlights possible boundary conditions to the impact of the socio-structure on undesirable discourses. For example, the positive impact of identification on nativist discourse, particularly for individuals already grappling with anti-immigrant sentiments, has been well established [84, 85] and supported in our findings. However, we also noticed that identification comes with distinctive features that limit the spread of contentious related discourses to a broader audience. Outcomes of the identification affordance may appear to serve the role of a “safety valve” online [86, p. 33] by creating room for an iconoclast group of individuals to let off steam. Still, the subversive discourse that may emerge is restricted to groups bounded online by a common language and rituals, making it likely to stay at the margin of the public sphere as too obscure for most social media users.

Similarly, affordances like curation seem to normalize individuals’ engagement when talking negatively about race to comply with Singapore’s strong moral and political frame. Participants expose their uneasiness at the thought of challenging the dominant cognitive structure about racial acceptance online. Individuals who participate in collaborative practices of curation facilitate the circulation of discourse that resonates with the audience while respecting the norms imposed by the authority. In such a context, social

media platforms help create a dressed and framed discourse that addresses frustrations in agreement with the normative environment.

The results question whether the scholarly attention, primarily steeped in the western democratic context, may be unevenly distributed across the different components of the socio-structure, neglecting important factors such as the socio-political influences. Although most interviewees expect to be exposed to toxic attitudes online- a pre-conception often emanating from a democratic context that suggests norms against prejudice are more prominent online than offline [9], participants' self-reported interaction with social media does not support such a claim. The online socio-structure in Singapore discards rather than promotes the visibility of anti-immigrant discourse on social media. While affordances linked to curation pressure users to avoid posting or sanctioning controversial content, affordances linked to identification limit its spread. These outcomes underline the importance of boundary conditions of the impact of social media affordances linked to the socio-political context. The constraints of the normative context in which social media users engage appear to supersede the influence of affordances of the techno-structure in shaping and selecting discourses.

Second, in the context of anti-immigrant discourse in Singapore, the ability for individuals to effectively circulate controversial discourse appears more related to their ability to make their rhetoric palatable and acceptable than to the technical features that support and promote its visibility in the online public sphere.

Internet scholars often disagree on whether social media can help individuals vent "before they take their gripes to the streets" in controlled societies" [86 p. 33]. Some observers argue that individuals on social media can be part of a quasi-public sphere and collectively become a counter-public to criticize and mobilize against the authority [87]. From these interviews, the role of social media as a quasi-public sphere is not evident. In fact, participants' concerns and frustrations at the lack of constructive deliberation online suggest that the general aspirations linked to expression are not about venting but venting appropriately. Many commentators have underlined the intense preoccupation with moral education in Singapore and the tendency to promulgate a sustained policy of molding the people into law-abiding national citizens [87, 88]. The ability to legitimize the sharing of grievances, so they are receivable and acceptable emerges as an essential factor in the respondents' expectations toward their online communities. It underlines the importance of discursive strategies to express and spread opinions that are frowned upon. Such interpretation may emphasize the importance and the legitimacy of the co-opted marginality discourse among Singaporeans, as they may feel twice victimized when expressing anti-immigrant discourse, once by the fear of immigrants and second by the fear of speaking out about it.

Finally, this study has provided insights into aspects of anti-immigrant discourse on social media. It appears that the effect of affordances is bounded to the context and that "the issue is not always the issue." Although peer-to-peer communication on social media is often depicted as offering a socio-structure that enables challenging the mainstream top-down communication processes [90, 91,92], our findings remind us that users online are not so easily inclined to discard prevalent social norms [6, 7, 8]. Besides, immigrants are also not always the central element stirring anti-immigrant talk. Beyond the influence of the new interactional possibilities in the online public space, citizen's narratives are fashioned by the norms and constraints of the political environment, by how individuals feel they can speak out and how they feel they fit in the chain of contributors to the political community. Affordances of the socio structure may bolster the restraints imposed by the normative context and require individuals to develop strategies

to overcome them. In our study, the adoption of co-opted discourses allows individuals to depict undesirable realities in acceptable and convincing ways while circumventing limits imposed by the socio-structure for self-expression

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Just Accepted