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**Schism: How Domestic Pandemic Measures
Divides Chinese International Students'
View on Online Privacy and Surveillance**

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Abstract

This study examines the perception of Chinese students who are studying abroad towards domestic digital pandemic measures implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their conception of personal information and privacy. Through face-to-face interviews and qualitative thematic analysis, the study found that interviewed Chinese international students who returned to China during the pandemic expressed concerns about the intrusive nature of the digital measures, while those who did not return had a more neutral or positive attitude based on filtered information. The study provides insights into the thought process behind individual's opinions and attitudes, contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between digital control measures and personal privacy. The inability to identify the difference between commercial and official information collection among the interviewees implicates CCP's underlying Foucauldian attempt of making itself unseen behind its policies and actions. It also highlights the influence of political and cultural factors on students' perception of online information collection and suggests the need for further research with larger sample sizes, quantitative approaches, and international comparisons.

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Introduction

The topic of this study originated from the domestic control measures implemented by the Chinese government during the Covid-19 pandemic and their changing reception among Chinese citizens. The heavy quarantine measures enforced during the past three years have led to public outcries, particularly in the latter half of 2022, with citizens across provinces criticizing the policies for excessive lockdowns and invasive information collection measures, such as the various digital "code" systems. Understanding the process of change in citizens' attitudes towards these measures can provide insights into the perception of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) domestic authoritarian activities. International students, who have experienced a different atmosphere abroad, may serve as a suitable group for observing these changes in perception.

Onto the research itself, I first reviewed literatures related to digital authoritarianism, surveillance, and China's unique state of self-censorship to better understand the theoretical cultural background and potential tendencies of the interviewed participants within this context. In terms of the participants, I also reviewed studies on digital literacy, privacy concepts in the specific cultural context of China, and texts related to domestic control measures during the pandemic to better understand the social background of the participants. Subsequently, I formulated three research questions and developed the methodology. After conducting interviews and transcribing the recordings, I performed thematic analysis on the interview data and discussed the two main categories of opinions that emerged under three prevalent themes, as well as possible reasons for the divergence of opinions. Finally, I provided a conclusion, proposed potential directions for future research, and identified limitations of this study.

Literature Review

This research mainly focuses on the impact of digital authoritarianism, self-censorship, surveillance, digital literacy, and online privacy in modern mainland China under the control of the CCP. It examines the reception of these issues among Chinese citizens who have experienced them not only from within but also from outside of China. More specifically, how the effect of digital authoritarianism and surveillance in the form of domestic online pandemic control measures impacted on Chinese international students' level of digital literacy and their view on online personal information and privacy. Although the research itself will not directly compare this situation with that in other parts of the world in practice, it is still very important to note and discuss that the inter-relationships among these factors are also present in other regions.

Digital Authoritarianism

To begin, it is important to first discuss the concept of "digital authoritarianism." According to Polyakova and Meserole (2019), digital authoritarianism refers to the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations (p. 1). While it is debatable whether other types of governments utilize this form of surveillance or not, the key terms of "surveil, repress, and manipulate populations" through information technology-related measures remain relevant to this paper. It is evident that in recent years, there have been demonstrations (or at least attempts) of such measures globally, especially after the international outbreak of Covid-19. Furthermore, the authoritarian aspect of this concept can be identified given that the governments of mainland China and Russia are broadly considered as the main examples of authoritarian practices. Considering the supposed scope and origin of this research, the focus of the discussion will be on the CCP's side.

In 2022, Xu conducted a survey study on China's controversial Social Credit System. The research explored the history and origin of this digital state surveillance system and presented arguments from both sides. The study was supported by a quantitative field study conducted in several Chinese universities. The results showed that although the respondents were aware of the positive impact of the SCS on social order, they often found its political control undesirable. This may be due to an underestimation of government abuse. According to Xu's theory, government information control may play a role in shaping respondents' opinions by presenting a positive framework for the system. The study also discussed potential outcomes if the system were implemented nationwide, including social distrust and discrimination against low-score citizens. An interesting question raised by this study is how to determine the level of digital literacy when social engineering is at play. Even if all respondents are students from elite universities with high levels of digital literacy, an emphasis on state security combined with powerful propaganda can render technical education ineffective in decision-making.

Huang's 2022 work on Modern China's politic and economy of surveillance provides an analysis of how Chinese government built a comprehensive system of intrusive surveillance and control that connects with every aspect of society by allowing domestic firms to "adapt foreign technology" and develop their own technology upon it in the past two decades' market liberalisation. The paper also discussed the dynamic between this successful model of technological advancement and global backlash from other countries in the age of globalisation when China inevitably becomes the dominator of public procurement contracts and export markets. This dynamic of constant tension between western critique and the ongoing business success is an ongoing struggle even outside of China. It concludes with the observation during Covid-19, stating the pandemic "exacerbated this trend" by providing more

opportunities and potential fields of technologies that can be applied to the measures.

Self-censorship in China

An important aspect of the practice of digital authoritarianism is self-censorship, which is often the case in the media industry, and may, to an extent, occur on the less-regulated online social platform. Lee (2009, p112) defines self-censorship as "non-externally compelled acts committed by media organizations aiming to avoid offending power holders such as the government, advertisers, and major business corporations". In this case, the CCP can be identified as the power holder. Vuori's (2015) research on Chinese online censorship also sheds light on the issue, providing data on how the state censors online speech and its underlying motive. Vuori's analysis revealed that Weibo's search function employs a two-layer system, where temporary political incidents are filtered for brief periods, while words build oppositional awareness are continuously censored. Additionally, words associated with CCP itself but not opposition or protests are the ones that frequently got censored. This tendency to ban political discourse instead of temporary social unrest offers another interesting perspective on the mechanism behind controlling opinions during controversial pandemic measures. The impact of these unseen methods and filtering motives on the participants' answers is uncertain, but it presents potential interview questions for the research process.

Surveillance

One other important aspect of the practice of said digital authoritarianism is surveillance, which has gained significant attention in modern society with technological advances facilitating unprecedented level of monitoring. The origins of modern iteration of 'surveillance' can be traced back to the 18th century when Jeremy Bentham introduced the concept of panopticon (Crimmins, 2021): a prison design featured a circular building with cells lining the outer walls and a central observation tower, from which guards could observe all prisoners without being seen. Thus, creating a pervasive sense of constant surveillance and control.

Michel Foucault's work "Discipline and Punish" (1975) provides an extensive analysis of the panopticon as a metaphor for contemporary systems of power and control. He argues that the panopticon represents a new form of power that relies on constant observation and surveillance, rather than physical punishment. He contends that this type of power is most effective when it operates subtly through the constant threat of observation and punishment, rather than repression. In the digital age, Foucault's ideas about the panopticon have gained renewed relevance, as technologies and social media have obviously made it easier than ever to monitor people's movements and activities. The discussion of the panopticon in "Discipline and Punish" highlights the ways in which modern systems of power operate through constant

observation and control of individuals, and how this form of power has become increasingly pervasive in modern society. Ultimately, the debate around surveillance will continue to be a critical topic for analysis and discussion in the years to come.

With the background knowledge paved by Foucault and Bentham, the special situation of Chinese online surveillance can now be addressed as well. However, as Hou (2019, p. 2252) addressed, theories on commercialized surveillance in Western democracy does not apply in the Chinese context because “state-market collaboration benefits the powerful party state, and citizens have no alternative means of expression”. The concept of commercialized surveillance is in association with the concept of surveillance capitalism from Zuboff (2014), for which she stated is a type of economic and social logic that emerged in the digital era, where big technology companies collect, analyse, and sell personal data from users for profit. It is true that mega corporation exists in China but given the persistent tension between regulating market and allowing economic boom, online surveillance in CCP regime obviously has a very different structure compared to a western setting. As Hou addressed, IOC (Internet-opinion company), a special kind of profit driven organization, provides ample amount of varies kinds of information and opinion-control measures online for all levels of local governments in China. The need for information and opinion control of the government and the strong control over the market made this industry into a reality, and despite how Hou classifies these IOC into three vastly different types, the core function does not change among them at all: provide online control over Chinese citizens. On the other hand, the three stages of state-market collaboration Hou identifies are very accurate under the context of current Covid online measures if we consider what Ji mentions in his work – the online measures for the past two years originated from Tencent in the city of Shenzhen without much government’s official demand (as during early February of 2020 the pandemic situation was still mostly underestimated outside of Wuhan). This fits the first stage of Hou’s state-market model, commodification. The surveillance system was then adopted throughout the nation, but there are very little mentioning of Tencent’s technical involvement on it, as it was being swiftly legitimized into an official way of controlling the spread of the virus and institutionalized by the local health code system developed by different provincial governments shortly afterwards.

In conclusion, the unique structure of online surveillance in China requires a different lens through which to view it, particularly considering state-market collaboration and the need for information and opinion control by the government. While Foucault's analysis of the panopticon remains relevant, the situation in China presents unique challenges that require a more specific approach. Nonetheless, his insight on the power dynamics of surveillance is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where state control over the market is much more persistent.

On Privacy

To start it is essential to establish a standard definition of privacy. By the term of Online Etymology Dictionary, the word privacy can be defined as the "state of being free from intrusion or interference". However, the concept of privacy in the context of China's situation is a unique and complex phenomenon that warrants further discussion.

To investigate the matter in a context where both Chinese and Western culture can influence the potential participants, a look on both sides is needed. Yu Quanwei's 2020 paper on China's protection of personal information is a quantitative research and a comprehensive comparison of China, Europe and North America in regard to its origin of the personal privacy policy origin. It contains a shade of CCP's propaganda when discussing how the current Chinese privacy policy operates, but the arguments on its special sociological and linguistic origin compared to the other two regions are, in my opinion as a native Chinese, valid to say the least, and are my main focus when reviewing.

According to Yu (2020), unlike Europe and America, "privacy" as a concept in China emerged as a by-product of the current Internet generation and the urbanisation process. The direct translation of the word "privacy" (隐私, the character '隐', pronounced 'yin' in this context means 'hidden' and '私' carries the notion of 'self') first officially occurred in The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors in 1991. He then digs deeper into this linguistic detail and mentions that the possible predecessor of the phrase, "阴私 (the character '阴', also pronounced 'yin', in this context means 'shaded' or 'shady')", carries predominantly a negative implication from its very composition, a possible outcome of the long-standing traditions of collective lifestyle even after 1949. He argues that even in the current era, the perception of privacy is still somewhat 'blurry' when the subject is related to a larger organization (for example, the government). The data collected then proves his point by showing the result of 60.9% of overall participants willing to give their personal data to a "trustworthy organization", and when the subject became even clearer (blatantly stated "national security"), the number grew into around 80% in total. This result is backed by Shen Qi's 2015 research on Internet information privacy behaviour, which showed a similar result in a slightly different theme.

On the other hand, in Yu's (2020) opinion, the perception of North America on privacy is a strict "relationship of public-private duality", where in Europe it is affected by its general 'supernationalism'. What is evident here is that even ignoring the historical factor, the cultural and sociological difference is enough to separate China's privacy policy and the perception of its people from the western world.

To look deeper into the western aspect, Yong Jin Park's quantitative research (2011) on "examining the role of digital literacy in the control of personal information online",

is a good point of entry. Participants are all citizens of the United States, and the result showed a mixed relationship between knowledge and action toward protecting privacy, divided by a wide array of sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, income, and education.

Of particular interest is the finding that the level of privacy protection practises among citizens in North America is not consistently high, as evidenced by the mixed results. This raises questions about the factors that influence individual privacy behaviours, and how they may vary across different demographic groups. Park's observation regarding the potential for a stratified level of privacy literacy to persist and even intensify in the face of rapidly evolving technological advancements is particularly noteworthy. However, given the age of the study, it remains unclear to what extent this prediction has come to fruition in the years.

Going back to the root of privacy, in a digital environment, privacy takes on a more modern perspective, as seen in Ahmet Ilci's (2019) qualitative study on Chinese and U.S. university students' perception of privacy in educational environments, including education-related software, school systems, and online learning. While narrow in scope, Ilci's research provides insightful perspectives that can be extended to a broader population, including Chinese international students in Hungary. Although the research also includes instructors and university IT employees, this paper will focus primarily on the students' perspective.

According to Ilci's interviews during 2019, students are indeed sensitive to their personal data in an educational setting, "being anonymous is essential" and "protecting your information no matter what platform they take a course from" is the general description for this dimension. However, from the looks of it how literate are those students in the first place regarding digital privacy should also be an important factor, which Ilci somewhat failed to capture (it can be argued that it is present in some of the actual quotes from the interviews), something I can improve upon by my own when designing interview structure. Students' own personal socioeconomic backgrounds and their majors should also be a concern when concluding his point, which he did not discuss in detail.

On the other hand, the part where he discussed students' conceptualization of privacy is essential to my topic. What he briefly mentioned about how 'domestic (American)' students appeared more comfortable in sharing information is a curious observation since in a way it contradicts what was established in Yu's (2020) paper where an overwhelming 60.9% of overall Chinese participants were simply willing to give their personal data to third-party organizations (and it raises even more when the organization is government-related). A closer inspection is needed, should there be a chance for further international comparison in the future.

For similar motives, Lin's study of privacy preferences in the U.S. and China by

is reviewed. It is a quantitative study between Chinese university students and American university students in regard to how willing they are when facing location-related digital privacy issues (e.g., sharing real-time location with others online, surrendering location tracking data to applications, etc.). Two reasons for reviewing this article: my current potential participants will be mostly the same with this research (being Chinese university students), and more importantly, I personally believe that location-based privacy issue is a key factor of China's digital surveillance policy, which means the results and implications of this paper on Chinese participants should be viewed as useful insights.

As Lin stated, prior studies showed that people's location-sharing preferences rely heavily on specific contexts and situations. However, generally speaking, Chinese participants are, in fact, more "conservative" in sharing location compared to American students, showing a lower mean value on all categories of situations except for school-related sources (the "University community" category). The result is reversed after eliminating the possibility of having various levels of privacy settings – Chinese participants would share more information if the situation were an all-or-none type of choice. An overall surprising result if we only consider the cultural or political stereotypes of modern China. Considering this research was conducted before the pandemic, how things may change should be an interesting point of a topic when designing interview questions. On the other hand, the four-category system (close friends and family, friends on SNS, university community, & advertisers) Lin developed for different contextual location-related privacy issues is a useful tool that I may integrate into the designing of my own interviewing questions, albeit there will be some obvious changes in specific categories (compared to what we already had in potential research questions).

Zhang et al. quantitative research on Chinese university students' information literacy (2018) is another article that I investigated on this matter. Zhang approached Chinese undergraduates' digital literacy in four aspects: information and media awareness, information needs, ability of information access and selection and ability of information evaluation. According to his results, Chinese undergraduates in general lack understanding of information security "and that on privacy quite weak". This somewhat contradicts what Lin implies where his Chinese participants showed more conscious when sharing their locations. I suspect the reason behind this is Zhang's approach is more academic while Lin's result showed how participants view their privacy during their daily lives. Zhang's sample also contains only undergraduates in China. Both of these inspections involve that there should be a difference between Chinese international students who stayed in China for longer periods and those who did not.

Zang (2022) looked at the concept of "privacy helplessness" in the context of the Chinese social application Sina Weibo. By his definition, privacy helplessness refers to the concept of learnt helplessness. In a digital privacy related context, it means the sense

of helplessness caused by the notion of how privacy leak is “inevitable”. Users may simply ignore all the privacy measures they can take under this notion, thus causing a downward spiral for the entire scene. Zang created a number of on-line on the said platform and analysed the result in a quantitative manner. By his result, Weibo users’ privacy helplessness was a product of their digital literacy, and digital literacy is positively correlated with users’ age and education attainment. He emphasised on the importance of educating its users and forcing a platform-wise inspection on potential leaks when it comes to on-line security measures, but did not give any precise policy making methods.

Furthermore, in 2020, Jin criticised on how commodifiable personal data is in modern China. Jin selected a number of legal cases for the past half decades on this matter and claimed that it is crucial for the officials to step in and take control of the commercialization of personal information online. What made me review this paper is how he emphasized on the enterprise side of China’s situation (and gave the appropriate examples). One of the most obvious (or radical) cases is his direct quote on Netease’s CEO Li Yihong’s controversial statement on how Chinese internet users are more ‘open’ to selling their personal information for ‘convenience and efficiency’.

Jin and other aforementioned Chinese researchers have a rather curious claim where they seem to blame the privacy issues onto the commercialisation or nongovernmental side of the market and the eastern culture itself. What is true is that during the pandemic period most of the online privacy invading measures are being conducted on unofficial daily use social applications like WeChat and Alipay, but they are being conducted by the local government on operating on the application, and what Tencent and Alibaba did was, in my opinion, essentially providing the medium the officials needed. *Epidemic Surveillance: A Comparative Legal Sociological Analysis* by Weidong Ji is a comparison of Chinese and Japanese pandemic measures during 2020, and the Ji’s work is being mentioned here is his study on Chinese digital surveillance measures since the start of the pandemic. He stated that the famous Health Code system was first implemented by Tencent in Shenzhen in February 2020, and the conducting of real-time infection numbers was implemented by Dingxiangyuan’s WeChat public account in January. Both of them were important official online epidemic prevention and control measures throughout the whole period in China, yet both of them were first implemented by private corporations from the get-go. This inseparable duality may also be the reason why Chinese Internet users have this ambiguous standard on personal privacy. I took another look at this matter from a different perspective when reviewing Yao’s analysis of the Network Structure of the spread of Public Opinion on Microblog in the COVID-19 (2020). It is a discourse analysis of the information related to Weibo’s Chinese social network Covid. Yao’s result indicates that official government outlets on Weibo have an overwhelmingly dominant position in spreading Covid-related information – not specifically related to this paper’s topic, but it still shows how the aforementioned duality persists on the

Chinese internet – CCP officials have a dominant position in its overall power dynamic in the online atmosphere during the Covid era. Another supplement to this observation comes from Liu's Typology and Governance of Information Disorder Related to COVID-19 in China (2022). Liu examined the spreading of false information ('the rumour') during the pandemic and the rumour refuting the effect of propaganda & mass reporting on said spreading. It showed a picture of how Chinese officials efficiently controlled the social media outlet under their control during the time period when needed.

Digital Literacy

What "digital literacy" means and why is it important when it comes to personal online privacy issues during the Covid period in China is crucial to the subject matter. Aguilera's work (2022) provides a comprehensive and up-to-date foundation for this matter. She summarizes three prior frameworks regarding the definition of digital literacy, namely: the cognitive perspective, which is a set of discrete skills that can be taught or learned; the sociocultural perspective, which is how the users engage the practice of meaning making in changing social and cultural contexts; and the situated perspective, which is a combination of the previous two where the importance of the coordination of multiple resources, tools, artifacts, and agents in complex systems of activity is evident. Aguilera concludes that the cognitive perspective of digital literacy consists of "a set of skills, abilities, competencies, or bodies of knowledge that can be acquired, measured, or evaluated. (p. 21)" which is important in the context of this research, where digital literacy can be justly defined as the bodies of knowledge that can be used online during the ongoing pandemic situation in China. The additional sociocultural context also emphasizes Aguilera's second point, which highlights the varying repertoires of practice based on different contexts, participants, institutions, and power dynamics. The existence of The Great Firewall in China may cause the way Chinese citizens practice their digital literacy to differ from the rest of the world. As a result, it becomes uncertain how Chinese international students view IT-related matters after experiencing a more global online environment. This uncertainty may manifest itself in the current pandemic period through the unusual online security procedures implemented by the Chinese government, which is the focus of this research.

In short, the term 'digital literacy' in this research means the bodies of knowledge that are used with information technology to acquire and look for information. The ongoing pandemic situation in China and the CCP's control of most of its online platforms may have a significant impact on it, and this impact should be visible to international Chinese students who studied abroad for the past two to three years.

Online Pandemic Measures in China and Its Issues

Continuing with the Covid policy issue, Liu and Zhao's discourse analysis (2022) of around one thousand pieces of CCP's propaganda texts on Covid-related privacy policy during the start of the outbreak is worth of discussion. They effectively coded an index of commonly used phrases on these news coverages using WORDij 3.0. There are four main semantic clusters following the main "pandemic" narrative: technology, service, state, and health QR code (loosely referring to all the official applications that track multiple locational privacy data from smart devices). According to Liu, the narrative on pandemic measures portrayed CCP as a traditional paternalistic figure as Chinese cultural orientations would, taking advantage of the rapidly ageing population and its presumably low level of digital literacy: deploying a technology of digital service technology that cannot be used by the elderly, then taking over control by providing related services, facilitating citizen's 'acceptance and subsequent expectations for the state in terms of guardianship discourse, rather than democratic procedures.' Furthermore, the cultural heritage and the faithful way of describing the result of mass surveillance "promote a conception of common interest defined and advocated by the state" (Liu & Zhao, 2022, p. 754). It would be interesting to compare this seemingly positive outcome during the start of the pandemic to the current situation in China when interviewing Chinese students who have experienced the whole event (specifically in China). The analysis of the elderly and their digital literacy also implies that the level of acceptance of privacy issues is heavily related to either digital literacy itself or simply a generation gap, and some questions or just general direction on this matter can be useful.

The work of Martinson and Ma (2009) on the generation gap and management differences is also particularly important because it defines the factors that determine different generations in modern China. By analysing the impact of specific historical events on the Chinese population since 1949, Martinson divides the Chinese population into three generations and proves the existence of differences among the management of ethnic information of these three generations, thereby validating this method of categorization. When examining the impact of COVID-19 on privacy issues in China, Martinson and Ma's research suggests that the generation gap should be rather obvious even among students within the same age range. Those who have experienced the pandemic in China should have a very different view on their privacy issue compared to those who have not returned to China for the past two years. Some additional discourse analysis between the two 'versions' of the interview transcript from Chinese students may be interesting to further explore this issue.

In addition to the generation gap, Yongqi Zhang's quantitative research based on the 2018 China Elderly Social Tracking Survey on rural China's elderly pointed out that basic digital literacy is at a moderate to low level, especially in central China. This finding is consistent with Liu and Zhao's critique of how CCP, as a paternalistic figure,

takes advantage of the elderly. Zhang's research further stated that the effect of digital literacy on rural elderly is moderated by the presence or absence of digital family feedback. This finding emphasises the importance of the influence of participants' surroundings on their attitudes toward digital literacy and privacy issues.

Overall, the research on generation gap and digital literacy in China provides a valuable insight into how different events and socio-economic factors have shaped the attitudes of different generations towards privacy issues. With the COVID-19 pandemic being a major historical event in modern China, it is important to explore how this event has affected the attitudes of different age groups towards privacy issues and digital literacy. Further research in this area will help policymakers and technology companies better understand the privacy concerns of Chinese citizens and develop effective strategies to address these concerns.

The review process has led to the narrowing of the focus of this study, specifically to the inclusion of Chinese international students. It is important to note, however, that the insights gained from the western aspect of the research can still be considered relevant, as the overall environment of these potential participants find themselves is situated within a Central European context.

Research Questions

As demonstrated from the literatures, privacy and surveillance in China are complex and multifaceted and require careful consideration. The lack of privacy protection measures and the collection of data without explicit consent raises serious ethical concerns, particularly in the context of a pandemic. As such, more research is needed to better understand the complexities of this issue and develop effective solutions that balance the need for public safety with the protection of individual rights and freedoms.

The research questions for this study are the following:

1. How do Chinese students study in Hungary regard privacy and surveillance issues in general?

What exactly do participants think of them when it comes to modern smart applications?

When using commercialised social media?

In case of Chinese government operated applications?

Do participants acknowledge how local governments and daily social media both play roles in collecting their private data and to what extend do they acknowledge this?

What if the said applications are related to Covid-19? Will there be any

change in their attitude?

Is there any difference between students who stayed in China for the whole pandemic and the ones who were in Hungary?

How well do students distinguish the two concept or is there any differences in their mind of these two?

2. What does digital literacy mean to them?

How “literate” do participants view themselves regarding this issue?

What are the factors that make participants evaluate themselves as such?

(Age, generation gap, related education, practical knowledge, experiences, ideology, etc.)

3. What factors do the students consider when deciding what data to give about themselves?

(Trust in the system, who is doing the data collection, how useful the return would be, parents', relatives', peers' – Chinese or international students' influence, region, etc. Note: may also contain aforementioned two questions' interpretations when doing the interview.)

When the factors have contradicted effects, what determines the outcome for the decisions they make?

Methodology and Data

This study delves into the perceptions and perspectives of Chinese international students on the topic of digital privacy, exploring multiple aspects through qualitative face-to-face semi-structured interviews. A total of seven interviews (in Mandarin, translated to English during transcription) were conducted with Chinese students who varied in their experiences during the pandemic, ranging from those who never returned to China to those who stayed in quarantine for up to one year. All interviews were conducted between March and April 2023, taking place at various universities and student residences in Budapest, Hungary. Each interview consisted of a maximum of twenty questions (see appendix) and lasted approximately twelve to twenty minutes. Additionally, Park's 2011 research serves as an important foundation for the research questions in this study. Park's framework of the three-dimensional relationship involving familiarity with technology, surveillance awareness, and policy understanding provides valuable guidance in formulating research questions for privacy-related behaviours.

Age	Alias (for anonymity)	Gender	Returned to China?	Duration in China
23	Jack	Male	Yes	2021 (2 months)
26	Mary	Female	No	N/A
22	Paul	Male	No	N/A
22	Bill	Male	Yes	2021-2022
24	Zoey	Female	Yes	2020 (1 year)
21	Jeff	Male	No	N/A
25	Tom	Male	Yes	2021 (2 months)

Table 1. Basic interviewee data

To better understand the impact of Covid-19 on the participants' views, considering contextual differences, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) approach was employed to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. The transcripts were carefully examined, and the NVivo software was utilized to aid in coding. Through this process, three common themes emerged from the participants' responses, which were further identified and analysed in-depth:

1. Sense of being controlled

A common theme among all the respondents who were once in China during the Covid-19 pandemic may involve the sense of being controlled by both physical and digital measures implemented to combat the spread of the virus. These measures, which included mandatory data collection, may have a significant impact on the daily lives of the interviewees. For those who did not return, their responses may be completely different from the start, since they lack the said physical experience. Since there are two groups of interviewees with very different experiences, it is important to note that potential differing perspectives on policy execution and its effects on individuals may shape the discourse and attitudes of the two groups of students in their interviews, with implications for understanding their perceptions and viewpoints. All in all, the range of themes within this dimension shows how participants view the notion of “control” and how they link this notion towards both the pandemic and the official.

2. Perceptions of personal info and privacy

The aforementioned digital measurements during Covid-19 in China have brought the concept of personal information to the forefront during the interviews. The participants' perceptions of what consists of personal information, how they obtained the knowledge, and how they handle it in various situations and time periods particularly in the digital realm, are important key points. What does the participants regard as personal info (to this extent, it may reflect the sense of privacy in a Chinese cultural context as mentioned during the literature review) and how do they handle them in different situations (commercial vs. official) and time periods (mainly in a digital sense) are other prominent themes.

3. Personal input on the past events

In face-to-face interviews, personal input (e.g., expression and/or emotion showed during interviews, attitude of their wording, etc.) on weighty matters such as the Covid-19 era is highly identifiable. The tone of the dialogue and the overall attitude when describing past events during this period should be closely intertwined with the interviewees' viewpoints. The personal justifications provided by the interviewees originated within real emotional impact to support their viewpoints are another significant theme within this dimension of analysis. As for those who stayed in Hungary, their justification (or sometimes lack thereof) on their attitude and viewpoints will be a good point of reference of this theme. Last but not least, the potential difference of time duration of those who stayed in China, ranging from two months to almost one and a half year may also play a role in a more specific observation of the emotional response (i.e., the possible correlation between negativity towards the online policy and time spent in China), though any observation made from this aspect may not hold any real significance before broadening the sample size or a quantitative approach.

Analysis and Discussion

In general, this study investigates the opinions of Chinese international students in Hungary regarding the online control policies implemented by CCP during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study examines the considerations and definitions of personal information that accompany these policies, as well as the impact of individual experiences on these two aspects. The study further employs these three dimensions as key areas of analysis in the practice.

Sense of being controlled

Among interviewees, the control measures imposed on individuals' lives due to pandemic-related policies are often reflected through their considerations of the legitimacy of these policies, particularly starting from a more physical perspective of lockdown, or in other words, the sense of being controlled over these physical

lockdowns and quarantines. It is mostly a common consensus among interviewed students who had come back to China during the past three years that these physical measures are partially justifiable but ultimately a negative factor over their daily lives.

'I had to waste almost half a month in quarantine before I could really go home. After that, I couldn't go out to play at all, it was difficult even to go out for a bowl of soup. The whole experience was very uncomfortable, and I regret it even now.' Quote from interview7 (Tom, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

'It's unreasonable to directly block an entire area for a long time just because of some individual information monitoring. You could do it like Europeans do and take it slow. Three years is enough time for a toddler to learn how to walk, what's wrong with taking it slow?' Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

However, among the students who had not return to home during the same period, even with the knowledge and rumours passed around them, their perspective seemed to be neutral at best.

'Yes, many friends celebrated when the control was lifted. I don't understand why. Because, you see, the continuation of these controls is going to keep people from getting sick and dying suddenly, that's a fact right? Among the people who are no longer under control, there are also some who have recovered from the disease, but the disease itself is not a good thing, right?' Quote from interview3 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

The discrepancy between the two groups of students persisted in their discourse on the justification of changing policies. Students within the participant samples who had actual physical experience in China tended to attribute the execution or lack thereof of policy changes to the government's control over citizens' lives and information.

'...I think initially it was for managing the epidemic, later somehow I feel like it became purely control and surveillance behaviours... or just control? Something like that.' Quote from interview1 (Jack, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

'...at first everyone around the world used various means to strictly control the pandemic, not just China. It's just that we've been doing it for three years now and still feel good about ourselves.' Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

In contrast, students who stayed abroad often did not connect the sense of being controlled with the effects of policies, possibly due to their lack of first-hand experience in China. Instead, their attention was usually on something unrelated to their own perspectives of daily life and on a more macro level of thinking.

'We can't just look at the fragility or the average fatality rate. The elderly are endangered in a relaxed controlled environment. So we must also consider their interests. Most of the time they can only rely on official collection and control to ensure personal safety. And this kind of measure often affects other groups of people once it is implemented. I think there are specific trade-offs here that need to be considered.' Quote from interview4 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

'I can't speak for them accurately, but as far as I know, I think you can collect information, but you can't restrict personal actions because of this information.' Quote from interview2 (Mary, did not return to China during pandemic).

There is also the occurrence where the participant did not return to China and did not receive too much relevant information on the whole matter. Their attitude tended to be neutral when the discourse was taken to a more hypothetical context, which may be a more unfiltered version of both sides.

'I can't recall... I couldn't feel anything. It was just a normal conversation (referring to his chats with his parents during the pandemic).' Quote from interview6 (Jeff, did not return to China during pandemic).

From the difference of the two sides, it seems the sense of being controlled has a positive correlation between the time the participants spent physically in China during the pandemic, or at least has a distinct line between students who returned to China and those who did not.

Having established the groundwork, it is now time to delve deeper into the digital part of the control measures in China during the pandemic which lies at the heart of this research. This aspect without a doubt warrants a more comprehensive analysis to understand its intricacies and implications. Starting with students who went back home and thus having real experience of said measures, all of them displayed a high and unique level of understanding of the various different health code and travel code system implemented in all provinces.

'...each provincial capital city has its own health code, and you cannot use the code from one province in another. Even within the same province, different regions have different health codes.' Quote from interview5 (Zoey, returned to China for one year from early 2020).

'The road closures and city lockdowns are not baseless... he (presumably head of the local government) needs to be informed by something or someone about where there are infections or potential dangers in order to know where to implement lockdowns, right? That's why they need our personal information as citizens, including where we went, what we ate, and who we slept with. Otherwise, if something happens and they can't figure out the source, the lockdowns will be even

more severe.’ Quote from interview7 (Tom, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

The contrast was vast when comparing to the ones who did not return to their hometown. Most of them, regardless of being neutral to the matter or not, showed a limited understanding of how the aforementioned code systems work. Their knowledge on this topic was largely based on hearsay from relatives or their own experiences with travel restrictions when attempting to purchase tickets to return home. This lack of first-hand experience with the code systems resulted in a less concrete understanding of any intricacies involved and their perceptions were often shaped by indirect information sources.

‘They (his parents) just mentioned that we needed to scan codes for certain things. There was no complaint or subjective opinion. We never had any exchange or discussion about it.’ Quote from interview6 (Jeff, did not return to China during pandemic).

‘I’ve never used them. I applied for one when I was planning to go back home for Chinese New Year at the end of 2019 but then the policy changed and I didn’t go back so I deleted it... they (referring to his parents) used it but they didn’t tell me the details... I have no understanding of it. I don’t even know how to apply for it. I have no idea what role it plays in epidemic prevention and control.’ Quote from interview3 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

This difference in understanding of situation led to a more specific outcome of opinions when those returned home were being touched upon the attitudes towards other invasive information collecting methods (like personal questioning of traveling plans via telephone) during the pandemic.

‘...I was also forced to give out my address and contact information abroad at that time, as well as my medical insurance card. I felt that all of this was unnecessary at the time. These things have nothing to do with them?’ Quote from interview1 (Jack, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

‘...last March I was arranged by relatives to work at a local police station for over a month – basically using some safety code algorithm or something, I’m not good with technical stuff. I just, well, collected lists of local residents who had travel intentions and called them up asking about their travel plans history and other things - then there was this lady who told me she wanted to go to Beijing so I followed procedure and asked her why she wanted to go there... I think I was violating her privacy just by dialling that number. Think about it, why did I call her? Just because I had to force myself into other people’s lives because of my job? It doesn’t make sense.’ Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

Lastly, when asked on experience or opinions on whether there is any degree of freedom under such circumstances. Those who were in China elaborated on their workarounds but also sometimes point out the danger of those said workarounds as their reasons of choosing to comply.

'Especially after I read on someone's entire itinerary on the local public account after being infected, it was really disgusting. I just didn't want to go out...' Quote from interview7 (Tom, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

'If you don't have it (a valid health code), climb a wall or two, you still go out one way or another.' Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

This complex consideration depending on individual experience over their trip back home is not present from those who did not return. Their thought on the outcome of such measures was, again, largely based on hearsay and assumptions.

'As far as I know, this (the exposure of personal itinerary) is not permanent nor is it nationwide... I think whether privacy is invaded depends on the degree of disclosure.' Quote from interview2 (Mary, did not return to China during pandemic).

'They (the information collecting code systems) have a collection of all sorts - I can't say what they are.' Quote from interview3 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

Perceptions of personal info and privacy

To start, it is important to note that the perception of personal information in contemporary China is situated in a unique context, as discussed in the literature and methodology sections. The concept of "privacy" has only emerged relatively recently within the past three to four decades, as reflected in official law enforcement documentation. This contextual background is evident in the responses of all the interviewees, including both those who returned to China and those who did not, in relation to their opinions and knowledge on the online control measures implemented by the CCP during the pandemic, as well as in hypothetical scenarios. There appears to be a presence of self-contradiction in the logic of the interviewees' answers when attempting to define the concept of privacy, particularly among those who stayed abroad during the past three years. The essence of this contradiction often revolves around how they view, or do not know how to view, the officials responsible for data collection or monitoring in the context of online control measures implemented by the CCP. This self-contradiction suggests that the interviewees may hold ambivalent or conflicting views on the role and legitimacy of the government's actions in collecting and

monitoring personal information, or, which may have a higher possibility, does not have a concrete definition of related concept to begin with, since they are something barely older than themselves in modern China.

'I think, actually, even for normal people there is no real online personal privacy. You can't guarantee that any of your personal information won't be collected by some third party, whether it's the government or not, whether it's for any purpose... If I have to say something, maybe they shouldn't monitor other people's real-time whereabouts and social relations on a daily basis.'

'...Privacy, how should I put it, I think it depends on who is handling it. If it is some large enterprises, then I hope to have a choice (of being monitored or not), but if it is my country, I will hand it over unconditionally.' Quote from interview3 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

'You see, if there were no official measures in China during the pandemic, but some private company developed some software or something else that uses information collection to screen for infection cases and so on by itself, then I could accept it interfering with my privacy when I know about this technical background. Of course, without government support I might indeed have a harder time being convinced.'

'Ah well I value so-called purposes (of information collection) because a lot of times I really don't know what their purposes are or even whether they have collected my information at all...at this point honestly I would be at a loss.' Quote from interview2 (Mary, did not return to China during pandemic).

On the other hand, when considering students who have returned to China, their understanding of related topics may also not be fully developed, as it is often based on their reflections on their physical experiences in China during the pandemic. However, despite the lack of clarity in their explanations, their responses tend to demonstrate a high level of sophistication in terms of the underlying logic and consistency across different respondents.

'It's all of my personal information... When I returned to China in 2021, customs asked me a lot of these things, and as I said it really pissed me off. Not only immediate ones (referring to real-time monitoring), but whether they were mandatory or not and what their purpose was also very important, I think.' Quote from interview1 (Jack, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

'...this is just like that lady's phone number, both are privacy...What right do they have to dial our phone numbers at will? ...All is (privacy).' Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

Finally, it is noteworthy that the attitudes towards commercialized personal data collection were unexpectedly similar among both types of interviewees. As evident

from some of the quotes provided, a majority of the interviewees seemed to place emphasis on the importance of having the 'choice' to give consent before their information is collected, particularly when the collector is a private corporation or when a hypothetical option is presented to them.

'It's more like, it's up to me to decide who I want to share my information with. It's my choice... Yes, it's about having the choice. Like when you meet a stranger at college, and you chat with them. It's normal to share a bit about yourself. It's your choice.' Quote from interview6 (Jeff, did not return to China during pandemic).

There's not much to deal with, if I could cancel my account or something like that maybe I would cancel it? Like some services that are impossible not to use maybe there's nothing I can do about them. Quote from interview2 (Mary, did not return to China during pandemic)

'It depends on whether I think these things are necessary or not. If I don't provide it, I won't be able to use some functions that I think are necessary then I will still take the initiative to provide them.' Quote from interview1 (Jack, returned to China during summer 2021 for two months).

However, as some readers may have already begun to question, the 'contradiction' in this case manifests in another distinct manner. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that when asked about their perspectives on health code systems, which are government-backed operations functioning on technically commercial social media platforms such as WeChat and/or Alipay, none except one (who vaguely pointed it out by herself without asking) of the interviewees were able to provide a direct response in any manner or form.

'...if it's done by the government, they would issue it uniformly, whereas individuals and different organizations are involved in creating the (health) code... Sorry, I'm a bit confused... Basically, because there are different company names in your health code, not just one.' Quote from interview5 (Zoey, returned to China for one year from early 2020).

This almost ironic silence observed among the interviewees in contrast to their earlier discussions is an intriguing phenomenon. Previously, they had emphasized the importance of distinguishing between commercial and official information collectors, discussing the clear distinction between the two entities. However, the sudden silence on this matter may be attributed to their limited knowledge about personal information, as mentioned earlier, or even more likely, their inability to accurately identify the presence of official elements in the data collection process.

Personal input on the past events

When conducting interviews with individuals who returned to China and engaging in discussions about pandemic measures, a high level of emotional distress is readily apparent. Many respondents express a sense of nihilistic resignation -- a feeling of helplessness and resignation -- displaying a passive response towards the pandemic measures that they perceive as overwhelming and beyond their control, reflecting a disillusionment towards their situation. This emotional distress is evident in their tone of voice, body language, and overall demeanour during the interviews.

‘Meaningless... (Note: there is an immediate interruption from him when the interviewer asked again on how he feels about the pandemic measures) Meaningless...[Sighs] If you have that thing (the code) and you want to go out, you go out...why bother with those things and seal things off like that? Meaningless.’ Quote from interview4 (Bill, returned to China for one year and three months from early 2021).

‘(When asked what impact the pandemic measures had on her life) To be honest, some of them were good, but some of them were not... (When brought up again at a later time on said positive aspects) If I have to say something positive, well [hesitates]... I can't think of anything. I'm sorry.’ Quote from interview5 (Zoey, returned to China for one year from early 2020).

In contrast to those who returned to China during the pandemic, participants who did not have personal experience with the quarantine measures lacked firsthand input in their opinions. Even when receiving information from their families or friends who were in China, the tone of their dialogue tended to be nonchalant at best. Again, this distinction may arise due to the absence of direct exposure to the challenges and impact of the quarantine measures on daily life. The nonchalant tone in their dialogue may also reflect a certain detachment or disinterest in the topic, as it may not hold the same level of relevance or significance to them as it does to those who directly experienced the quarantine measures. This contrast underscores the importance of considering the role of personal input and firsthand experience in shaping opinions and perceptions of pandemic-related policies and measures and highlights the need for a deeper understanding of multiple aspects in discussions on the topic.

‘Friends who went back to China also talked about these things... They were pretty resentful of it.’ Quote from interview2 (Mary, did not return to China during pandemic).

‘My parents are from Beijing, you see, and they opened a shop in Beijing, a barber shop. There was a period of time in the middle of 2021 when the country opened up, right? The health code was being utilized a lot more frequently... (when

asked about whether his parents were being actively bothered by the health code system) No... (when asked again for elaboration) No. 'Quote from interview3 (Paul, did not return to China during pandemic).

Finally, as a sidenote, it is worth mentioning that among the students who returned to China, Zoey and Bill, as previously cited, exhibited a higher level of distress in their attitudes. Notably, both Zoey and Bill stayed in China for over a year, which may have influenced their perspectives. While all participants expressed criticism towards China's domestic policies and measures, Zoey and Bill, who stayed in China for a longer period of time, displayed a distinct demeanor in their attitudes, as evident from their previous quotes. This observation raises an interesting point for consideration. The prolonged stay in China may have provided these two with more exposure to the local context, including the evolving situation of the pandemic, the cultural norms, and the social dynamics at play. It is important to note that the higher level of distress and criticism expressed by Zoey and Bill does not necessarily imply a lack of objectivity or validity in their perspectives. Rather, it underscores the potential impact of personal experiences and prolonged stay in a particular context on individuals' attitudes and perceptions towards policies and measures. This highlights the need to consider the subjective factors that may influence participants' responses in research involving personal opinions and attitudes, and to interpret the findings with caution, since evidently, these two participants appeared to possess a higher level of knowledge when discussing related issues.

Conclusion

This study mainly focused on Chinese international students' perception of CCP's domestic digital pandemic measures, and extended the scope into the territory of their conception of personal information and privacy. Three dimensions were identified with themes around their knowledge and/or opinion on the matter. Among them, firstly, it is clear that the unique contextual difference when regarding the concept of privacy in China is present in students' response, as most of the one who did not return to China could not give a consistent answer on the concept, and those returned often based their conception and reasoning solely on their experiences from the impact of returning, which may suggest the impact of invasive information collecting measures is not enough for any of them to form a comprehensive concept on the matter, due to there being no concrete base of cultural atmosphere to begin with.

Another noteworthy finding is how almost none of the respondents distinguish the government and private personal info collector or seem to have a good understanding of practical distinction in China, especially regarding the health code system – the ones who stayed could not justify their reasoning on whether the system is commercial or official, thus rendering their almost-shared opinion of giving info to the trusted officials (which is also in line with Yu's 2021 study) but not the private corporations on the

matter vaguely contradictory. Remarkably, this situation bears a resemblance to the ideal conditions envisioned by Foucault (or Bentham) in the concept of the panopticon, as discussed in the literature review. In this theoretical construct, the inmates (i.e., the citizens) are unable to peer into the tower (i.e., the officials) or perceive whether they are being monitored or not, creating a sense of uncertainty and control. This sheds light on the potential power dynamics at play in the collection and use of personal information, where individuals may feel powerless and uninformed about the surveillance mechanisms employed by the authorities without even noticing by themselves.

Besides that, the divide between the two groups is still evident. Students returned to China expressed concerns about the intrusive nature of the digital measures with examples from their personal experiences, which not only required the provision of personal information such as WeChat numbers or phone numbers but also limited their ability to carry out routine tasks. The interviewees highlighted how the sheer presence of data collection measures (temperature checks, health QR codes, contact tracing, etc.) became an omnipresent part of their lives. They felt constantly monitored and restricted in their movements, leading to a sense of loss of autonomy or even nihilism. In contrast, for those who did not return to China, their knowledge on such matters tend to be more neutral or even positive. Their justification (or sometimes lack thereof) on their attitude often depends on a more macro-level of aspects (e.g., official fatality rate statistics, parents' opinions, concerns for elderlies, etc.). This was often based on filtered information they heard from their relatives or obtained from various news outlets. The lack of direct experience staying in China during the era contributed to their perception as they may very possibly not have experienced the same impact from the measures on their daily lives.

Overall, this study aimed to provide an in-depth look into the potential change and underlying factors regarding the perception of online information collection in the eyes of Chinese international students in the pandemic era. The political and cultural root seems to be persistent even for those who has first-hand experience in China, but clearly a consistent gap in viewpoint between them and who stayed in Hungary is formed, which may be an indicator of how much the same can be said for those never left China. It will be exciting to see if these implications can be realized in a boarder sense (e.g., much larger sample size, quantitative approach, etc.) or, in some manner, researched inside China. How much does the cultural or linguistic background affects the outcome can also be interesting, therefore an international comparison should also be planned in the future.

Limitations

Limitations include the small, non-representative sample. Consequently, research results cannot be generalized. It should be checked whether findings hold its

significance for a larger sample in the future.

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Appendices

Interview questions & guide for interviewer

1. How long have you been in Hungary?

(Comment briefly on the time duration, then proceed)

2. Have you been back to China during the current pandemic?

(If they are ok with answering)

For how long?

During when?

Which province?

3. Are you familiar with the health code related pandemic measures in China?

(Mention the mandatory private data collection part for explanation / later use.

Rhetoric question for bait, express it accordingly, not really possible to say no since everyone from the sample will be local Chinese)

4. From where do you know about them?

(Not really an effective question if answer 2 is a yes but do comment on it)

5. From your experience / From what you've heard, what do you know about these measures?

Is it compulsory for everyone?

Are there any aspects of citizens' daily life being affected by it?

(Other questions should also be asked accordingly, depending on their reactions)

6. (Depending on their attitude on the last question, if no clear opinion, change the way of expressing) So you think these private data collecting measures are reasonable / unreasonable?

7. What makes you think it is reasonable / unreasonable?

8. Does your opinion on it change the way you comply / not comply to them?

9. What do you think about the term “online privacy”?

Any difference than in real life?

10. What kinds of personal data do you think should be concerned as “private”?

(Maybe under different circumstances? Different for different services? Changes through time? Let them express their thoughts if they have any. If not, proceed)

11. Do you think there is a line between “personal information” and “privacy”?

12. If the same kinds of private data were being collected by the government but on platforms other than WeChat or Alipay, are you still going to feel the same way?

13. If the same kinds of private data were being collected by the government before 2020 (or after the pandemic is over), are you still going to feel the same way?

14. If the same kinds of private data were being collected by other non-official mini applications/online services/websites/social medias, are you still going to feel the same way?

15. Do you know why are private data being collected for all those online services?

(Let them explain if they seem to know a lot)

16. Where do you know them from (if dont) Ever wonder why are theses things being collected?

(Again, let them explain if they seem to know a lot)

17. Are there people in your surroundings having different opinions than you in this regard?

What do you think about them? Their opinion?

18. What might be the cause for your differences in this regard?

Form of consent

By agreeing to participate in the interview and signing below, you are providing your voluntary consent for the following:

Participation: You understand participation in the interview is voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time.

Recording: You consent to the interview being recorded for the purpose of accuracy in data collection and analysis. You understand the recordings will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Confidentiality: You understand all information collected during the interview will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Your identity will be kept confidential, and your personal information will not be disclosed without your explicit permission, unless required by law.

Use of Data: You consent to the use of the data collected from the interview for the purpose of analysis, interpretation, and reporting in my project and related academic publications or presentations. Your responses will be anonymized to protect your privacy.