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The influence of social class on internship participation and outcomes in higher education: the case of Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Internships have been widely recognized as an effective channel for enhancing the employability of higher education (HE) students. Accordingly, any inequality in internship opportunities may lead to inequality in students' employability and future social positioning. Using Bourdieu's three forms of capital, this study explores how students' understanding and engagement in internship is affected by the differential resources available in their respective social class position and thus, the implications for the persistence of social reproduction in the future. Through in-depth interviews with eight HE students and three alumni from HE institutions in HK, we found that middle-class respondents engage in HE with cultural and social capital that motivate and facilitate their disposition and capacity to involve in internship. For working-class respondents, while a mismatched cultural disposition curtails their sense of utility, a lack of social capital limits their capacity to participate in internship. This study contributes to ongoing discussion on the relationship between social classes and education via the lens of internship involvement by providing evidence for the unequal playing field of internship for students of different social class positions.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) systems have experienced substantial massification since the 1950s. With wider access to HE, the educational attainments of students from different social classes have been increasingly levelled. Although the expansion of HE may suggest a more equal distribution of educational opportunities, allowing students from different social backgrounds to compete for a better future, however, an educational system can lead and sustain social inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the fresh graduate employment market (Brown et al., 2011), students are urged to develop mature soft skills (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017), or what Tomlinson (2008) termed "soft credentials", to compete for a "good, middle-class job". As a degree is no longer sufficient for obtaining a well-paid job (Bathmaker et al., 2013), internships have become a popular channel for students to gain access to valued cultural and social resources and accumulate the skills that enhance their employability in the globalized and competitive job market (Pellegrin & Hilton, 2012). Although the HE sector strongly emphasizes that internships enhance students' competitiveness, whether this emerging competition for "soft-credentials" exists on a level playing field for students from different social classes remains largely undiscussed, at least locally.

Using Bourdieu's three forms of capitals, this study explores how students' social class resources structure their understanding and engagement in internship, an element that might have implication to their employment outcome and therefore social positioning in the future. By drawing on

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personal experiences of current and former students from HE institutions in Hong Kong, we argue that the middle-class students are in a better position to get the most out of this emerging internship game due to their possession of cultural and social capitals that contribute to their better disposition and capacity to participate in internship. In other words, working-class students remain disadvantaged in the emerging landscape of HE.

Social class, educational achievement, and internship engagement

Social origin remains a strong predictor of individual educational and workplace success and social mobility in Hong Kong (HKLCS Research Office, 2015). Armstrong and Hamilton (2013, p. 10) argued that opportunities readily attainable to students of different social class are shaped by their similar lived experience and cultural, social, and economic resources. Scholars have adopted Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical tools of cultural, social, and economic capital to examine how higher-class individuals use these resources to maintain their advantages in educational settings. In these studies, parenting and family socialization have been identified as key factors to class-based outcomes (Calarco, 2014; Irwin & Elley, 2011; Lee & Chiu, 2016). To better understand how social class impacts these outcomes, it is important to investigate the various circumstances that mediate the impact of social class cultural endowments on students (e.g., Jack, 2016). By outlining the three forms of capital and students' pre-HE experiences, this study explores not only the effect of each form of capital but also the complex interplay between them in structuring student's perceptions and engagement in internship.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 175). Bourdieu (1986) further distinguished the concept of cultural capital into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The concept of cultural capital plays a central role in Bourdieu's analysis on social reproduction in education where the education system recognizes and rewards the dominant culture and punishes those, including the working class, who lack exposure to it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Highlighting the role of classed socialization and students experience in HE, previous research suggested that classed embodied cultural resources continue to influence students' experience in HE and intensify social class differences through their interactions with cultural norms, or rules, regulating life in HE (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2014). In the context of internship, Bathmaker et al. (2013) and Stuber (2009) argued that middle class students are not only in a "game" that is set up to their advantage (Bourdieu et al., 1999) but have also internalized the cultural disposition to know the best way of playing such a game (Bathmaker et al., 2013). They found that middle-class students tended to perceive or assume that internships would be enjoyable and useful, whereas working-class students were more likely to be sceptical of their value and desirability. The students who explicitly framed internships as means to build their CVs and improve job prospects were disproportionately middle-class (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Stuber, 2009). Connecting classed dispositions and behaviours to parental socialization, Bathmaker et al. (2013) attributed the middle-class advantages in internship experiences, in particular their "feel for the game", to their parents' "concerted cultivation", a child-rearing logic popular in middle-class families that tends to manifest as strategic participation in extra-curricular activities for capital generation and positional advantages (Lareau, 2011). Since such middle-class "investments" are in line with broader social and institutional values, class contexts and situations are argued to have continuously shaped individual behaviours and dispositions in ways that perpetuate social inequalities (Lareau, 2003; Reay, 1998; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

Working class students, in contrast, lack the cultural capitals to navigate the HE and the internship domain. Highlighting the parents' cultural transmission and children's reproduction of educational inequalities, Calarco (2014) argued that middle- and working-class parents transmit contrasting beliefs to their children about the appropriate behaviours, which then contribute to the stratified outcomes at schools through children classed problem-solving strategies in educational settings. These beliefs and worldviews held by working-class students had been argued to lead to their disadvantages in the domain of internship where they were found less likely to spontaneously participate in internships; some even explicitly expressed reluctance to participate in activities focused on CV building, describing them as "phoney and inauthentic" (Stuber, 2009, p. 888). Instead, these students tended to play the "meritocratic game fairly" (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 741) by considering good grades and good work ethics as the factors that gatekeepers should really be looking at. The emphasis on hard work and authenticity was argued to echo with the popular working-class culture documented by some sociologists (Gorman, 2000; Lamont, 2000). Of course, not every working-class student in these studies was heedless of the value of internships or predisposed against them. Yet, the working-class students with positive expectations of internships were often a small subset, and they faced specific difficulties when they tried to participate in internships.

Social capital

Students' cultural disposition and knowledge mean little if they are not supported by other forms of capital such as social capital. Social capital refers to "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). If an acquaintanceship with different persons or memberships in various kinds of social organization "guarantees a particular form of social relationship in a lasting way" (Bourdieu, 2001, 105), having such connections provides individuals access to resources that would typically be difficult for them to acquire on their own (Behtouia & Neergaard, 2015). Since social capital is closely linked to a broader range of structural relations, resources derivable from social connections are therefore unequally differentiated among different social classes.

The effect of social capital is also present in in-class as well as out-of-class experiences (e.g., Behtouia & Neergaard, 2015). The use of personal connections in job acquisition has been extensively documented across professions, educational levels and cultures (Jackson, 2021). Social capital can facilitate students' involvement in internships by providing a direct pathway for involvement. For example, in a 2017 study conducted in the US (as cited in Brown, 2020), 43% of 1,497 college students reported that they found internships through family connections. Only 31 percent found internships by themselves, and 21 percent found them through college career centres. Both Bathmaker et al. (2013) and Stuber (2009) found that middle-class students unambiguously exploited social connections and family networks. Some were well-disposed to "pull strings" and capitalize on "favours" owed to their parents (Bathmaker et al., 2013) while others exploited their connections without conscious recognition of their privileges, which was the result of their taken-for-granted disposition and opportunities. However, working-class students had no networks that connected them to prestigious positions even if they had a positive orientation to internships (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Stuber (2009) found that middle-class students were disproportionately exposed to information and discourse favourable to internships via parents and siblings, friends who also had college experience and others with similar middle-class backgrounds. In contrast, working-class students were ill-informed about internship opportunities and were not motivated to pursue them. Neither their family members nor others in their social circles created an environment in which internships were encouraged.

Economic capital

In addition to inequality in social and cultural capital, economic capital plays an important role in differentiating students' educational achievement (HKLCS Research Office, 2015; Pishghadam et al., 2023). In the context of internship, Cullinane and Montacute's study (Cullinane & Montacute, 2018) of 2,614 young graduates from the UK found that 40% of the 61% of graduates who had not participated in an internship were unable to do so due to financial difficulties, such as not being able to afford to work without pay or to move to the city where the internship was located. Among those 23.7% who were without any internship experience, 38% of the working-class cited affordability as the reason, compared to 31% among middle-class individuals. Among those who had completed unpaid internships, middle-class students were more likely to be funded by their parents and their own savings, whereas working-class students were more likely to have worked extra jobs to support their unpaid internships. Similarly, Frenette et al. (2015) reported that art students who did internships were more likely to have parents who could financially support their education than art students without internships, suggesting that internship opportunities are more abundant for those who can work for free (Perlin, 2011). Similar findings were found where, while most of the middle-class students in the studies of Bathmaker et al. (2013) and Stuber (2009) were financially able to participate in valuable internships far from their homes, some working-class students did not have the luxury to participate in unpaid internships in spite of realizing their usefulness to long-term career development.

Setting the scene: the expansion of HE in Hong Kong and the rise of internships

Over the past two decades, HE in Hong Kong has experienced substantial growth. Since 2002, the Hong Kong government has expanded the HE sector to produce more skilled workers for the development of Hong Kong's knowledge-based economy. In the 2015–2016 academic year, the HE enrolment rate of students aged between 18 to 22 reached 70%, a 50% increase over the 20% of 2002 when HE expansion was first implemented (Choi & Ng, 2019). Underlying this HE massification, however, is the devaluation of a degree in the graduate employment market (Choi & Ng, 2019). Therefore, students are now encouraged to strive for additional capitals for better positional advantages. One such option is an internship, which is a "soft credential" (Tomlinson, 2008).

Under the increasing demand from the job market for graduates with specific knowledge, skills and mentalities (Karunaratne & Perera, 2019), internships have been increasingly regarded as important extra-curricular activities that enhance students' employability and connect employers to pools of talented graduates (Maertz et al., 2014). Hence, internships are now a key component of employability policies for governments and HE institutions worldwide (Bolli et al., 2019; Hora et al., 2019). In Hong Kong, although there is a lack of official statistics, internships are becoming popular among HE students. In one of the UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong, for example, the number of students being enrolled in internship programmes had an average growth of 17.4% per year between 2011 and 2014 (Ip, 2015). The government also supports students' transition into the workplace and extra training in soft skills through internship programmes and subsidy schemes, such as the Administrative Service Internship Programme, Scheme on Corporate Summer Internship on the Mainland and Overseas and STEM Internship Scheme.

Despite the growing popularity and importance of internships, it remains largely undiscussed in Hong Kong whether this emerging competition for "soft-credentials" offers a level playing field for students from different social classes. In other words, the effect of internships on graduates' employability remains unknown. Being enlightened by the review above, this study uses the concepts of cultural, social and economic capital to explore how social class, in the Hong Kong context, structures students' participation in internships. Furthermore, while both Bathmaker et al. (2013) and Stuber (2009) concluded that inequalities in internship participations lead to social reproduction, they are yet to explore the mechanisms through which there is such a relevance, especially

when internship is becoming an equally accessible opportunity for university students across different social classes. To fill the gap, we examine whether inequality in the internship experience, if any, affects the graduates' employment outcomes. In particular, we focus on whether cultural, social and economic capital structure students' understanding and engagement in internships and the potential implications for social reproduction.

Using internship as a platform, this study explores the role of (cultural, social and economic) capital in the process of educational attainment. With reference to Bourdieu's theoretical discourse, we hope to add value to the underlying mechanisms for the persistence of social reproduction through internship in the latest HE sector.

Methodology

To answer the above questions, this study adopted qualitative in-depth interviews. Through interacting with the respondents, the researchers could ask follow-up questions, especially on the areas of how their family and previous schooling experience affect their perception and behaviour. To capture respondent's understanding and engagement in the recent landscape of education and workplace, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted during December 2020 and March 2021 with eight final-year students aged 21–23 and three graduates who had completed their degree in the past 5–10 years and were currently working in Hong Kong. Each interview lasted for around 60 minutes. In the interview, respondents were asked about their parents' occupations and positions, their understanding of internships, their internship engagement, and how internships affect their future employment. Respondents were followed up with probing questions to explore in more details why they gave such narrative and the effect of social classes and fields of study in shaping the perception towards internship. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, i.e., the mother tongue of the interviewees.

Among these 11 respondents, six came from middle-class and five were from working-class backgrounds. The respondents were selected based on a categorical model of social class where they were classified by their parents' occupations, parent's educational attainment (Pascarella et al., 2004), and their life chance and life experiences that corresponded to that structural location (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2003). On this basis the respondents were categorized into the middle-class and the working-class which might correspond to the Bourdieusian terms of the dominant and the dominated (Bourdieu, 1984). In this study, the parents of working-class respondents were manual labourers, such as decoration workers, chefs or supervisors of manual workers. None of the working-class respondents had parents or guardians who had completed a bachelor's degree. In contrast, upper middle-class respondents' parents worked as high-level professionals and administrators, such as professors, barristers and middle managers. The father of the only lower-middle class respondent was a petit bourgeois, i.e., an owner running a small-scale business. Apart from the lower middle-class respondents, parents of all upper middle-class respondents had completed a bachelor's degree at universities, and some of them hold postgraduate degrees.

Since students' fields of study may affect their career orientations and strategies for preparing for HE study and future career, this study also examines the experiences of students in diversified undergraduate programmes, namely, academic-oriented and professional-oriented programmes offered by HE institutions in Hong Kong. Accordingly, six respondents were from academic-oriented fields with curricula that were less vocational and provided training in more generic skills, such as logical thinking and analytical skills. These respondents studied sociology, criminology and liberal studies. The other five respondents were from professional-oriented fields that were more likely to provide technical training for a professional career, many of which require a professional licence examination upon graduation. The respondents from these fields studied surveying, business operation management, accounting, and biology. In order to investigate how respondents utilized their own resources when exploring the domain of internship, the authors exclusively selected respondents who were not mandated to complete an internship in an organization that was in

partnership with their HE institutions. Hence, they were free to choose to intern in any organization that offered them a position and suited their needs. Five of the respondents were or had been enrolled in private universities or institutes and six were or had been enrolled in UGC-funded universities.

Potential respondents were identified using snowball a sampling method where the researchers use their personal connections to reach out to the first batch of respondents. Then, the respondents referred friends to participate in the study. Although there is a possibility of selection bias in this method due to the tendency of "like attracts like", the respondents chosen through this approach were more inclined to trust the researchers who were endorsed by their acquaintances (Parker et al., 2019). It is important to note that the sample used in this study was not representative in a manner that would allow for statistical generalizations. The main objective of this study is to clarify how social class impacts the respondents' perception towards internship, as well as the ways they prepare and engage in it, with a specific lens of cultural, social and economic capital. Whether the results of this study can be generalized to the broader population remains a subject for future investigation.

The interview data was recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the data was pseudonymised. The data was analysed using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. The first author began by coding the data based on the theoretical framework of three capitals. Then, common and open themes related to class-based resources were identified, such as "attitude towards internship" and "values of credential competition" and "hard work" among respondents of different social classes. In order to explore the impact of social class, the respondents' dialogues were examined and evaluated in relation to their experiences and histories within their households, educational institutions, fields of study, and various organizations. The objective was to identify complexity of the root causes of their attitudes, behaviours, and patterns. The data coding, analysis, and interpretations were checked together with the second author. Subsequently, the data analysis was presented to the respondents for the validation, feedback, and refinement.

Findings

Internship: changing rules in HE and employment

Confronted with the increasingly competitive graduate employment market, all respondents were well-aware of the need to equip themselves with "soft-credentials" during their undergraduate studies. Nash, a middle-class student whose parents were a university professor and a senior manager at a private organization, made the following comments:

> In my father's generation, you could easily find a job after graduating from university. There was no need to actively build your CV. Yet, since there are increasingly more university graduates [nowadays], it is a bit difficult to stand out from the others . . . there are a few [thousand] or tens of thousands of students graduating from university each year . . . If there is nothing special on your CV, why should I (as an employer) choose you . . . since there must be many candidates who have built their CV.

The "generation" he mentioned was a time when there were only a handful of universities in Hong Kong, and only a small minority of students were able to be enrolled in universities and complete a bachelor's degree. A university degree thus conveyed an elite status that guaranteed a higher level of employability, which was no longer the case after the expansion of HE and the subsequent devaluation of degrees. The perception of "devalued degrees" was shared by all of the respondents, all of whom, regardless of their background, had secured at least one internship or equivalent work experience.

Social class, capitals and internship involvement

The increasing importance of internships highlights the need to examine whether the emerging game has a level playing field for students from diverse backgrounds. The aim of this study is to

shed light on the social reproduction process in higher education, particularly how social class structures students' experiences and participation in internships. Our findings show that respondents' social class backgrounds shaped their cultural dispositions and access to social resources, which in turn affected their ability to participate in internships on an equal footing with their peers.

Social class and the differences in cultural capital

During HE, respondents' cultural dispositions played a crucial role in shaping their attitudes towards participating in internships and its utility. Notably, middle-class respondents tended to perceive internship as a strategic opportunity to enhance their skillset, open up their mind and expand their horizon. For example, Nash, the middle-class student studying in an academic-oriented field, participated in two internships to explore his potential career path and enhance his skillset:

> At the time, I was learning qualitative research methods at school and wanted to expand my knowledge of quantitative methods. The internship I applied for provided opportunities to receive training in both areas. For my second internship, I wanted to explore my career potential beyond the research industry. I accepted a position as a clerk in a funeral company, where I learnt how to handle documents and gained exposure to an emerging industry.

What was telling about his narrative is his strategic conception of internship and a taken-for-granted disposition to generate capital through internship. All (6/6) middle-class respondents were equally aware of the reasons for their internship participation and some of them aimed at unambiguous career pursuits. For example, Teddy, who came from a banking family and was studying in a professional-oriented programme at a UGC-funded university, explicitly searched for an internship opportunity that could enhance his chance to enter a large international surveying firm after graduation.

When asked about their pre-HE extra-curricular activities, the respondents' strategic perception of internships appears to reflect the influence of their parents' concrete cultivation. For example, similar to many middle-class students in Hong Kong, Nash had participated in many organized activities during his primary and secondary school years, as he was given the opportunity and encouraged to explore his interests and potential:

> My parents never forced me to join in any of the activities, like playing piano and joining all sorts of exchange programmes in secondary school. They would explain to me how the activities would be fun, that I could meet all sorts of people and I would be able to do all sorts of things with them . . . This surely encouraged me to think of and find activities that suit me.

Nash's narrative clearly illustrated the active investment of his parents in fostering his participation in organized activities, with the aim of realizing his inherent capabilities and potential (Vincent & Ball, 2007, p. 1010) and supporting his self-directed goals. As a student in an academic-oriented degree that allowed for more career flexibility, Nash's advantaged disposition enabled him to engage in internships with a focus on exploring his own career goals and securing opportunities that are aligned with his objectives. It is clear that not all of the middle-class respondents had been taught to engage in this kind of self-directed learning; some had internalized strategic engagement in extra-curricular activities through many years of reinforcement by their parents. Nevertheless, an ability to "naturally" play the internship game is evident in the narratives of many of the middle-class respondents, who utilized internships to generate capital that is aligned with their career pursuit and future broader workplace rules.

When considering the strategic potential of internships, middle-class respondents demonstrated a better understanding of the norms in the workplace and the ways internships were related to the recruitment process. Richard, a middle-class student studying business management at a UGC-funded university and whose parents were barristers, provided an elaborative explanation emphasizing technical skills and cultural competence:

> Employers' requirements are nothing more than three things. First, it is your personal ability. [For example], they will see if you have any awards, outstanding coursework and results. In relation to business and management, they will see if you have any professional qualifications and extra certifications, or whether you have done the examination. Second, it is the cultural match between you and the company . . . If your values are different from the employer's, then you have a smaller chance of being employed. Third, it is your personal network . . .

What is clear in Richard's narrative is his taken-for-granted understanding of the credential competition. While he realized that it was in fact work ability and personality that were valued by an employer, he focused on the credentials or activities in which he thought could signify or cultivate these qualities. By recognizing these workplace rules, middle-class respondents had developed an approach to internships that was aligned with the norms of senior management or organizations in general, which would help them to stand out from others in the workplace in the future.

In contrast, the working-class respondents exhibited less favourable dispositions towards participating in internships. When asked about their motivation of participation, they often provided vague responses that indicated a desire to conform to dominant expectations. Emily, a working-class student studying in an academic-oriented field at a private university, participated in an internship in the summer between her third and fourth years because she thought: "[internship experiences] are like must-haves, [since] I want to enrich my CV . . . [Also], everyone has done some internships, and it would seem to be a waste of a summer holiday if I did not participate in one". Mathew, another working-class student studying in an academic-oriented field at a UGC-funded university, gave a similar explanation: "I think having an internship experience is better; maybe it will be beneficial in future job searches. Everyone said a university student needs to do an internship and exchange, so I have to do at least one".

Without internalizing the utility and strategic importance of internships, some of the working-class respondents provided a competing narrative regarding how higher education could equip them with employability, pointing to a mismatch between their dispositions and the dominant rules of the HE game. Mathew, the working-class student studying who was raised by a father who worked in manual labour and a stay-at-home mother, stated that his main focus in HE was to work hard academically:

> For me, I would focus on my academic work . . . It has always been my main focus [in primary and secondary school] to study hard for a better future . . . [In HE, I would try] to get a high GPA and graduate with a first-class honours degree that would make me a strong candidate [for future jobs] . . . That is how I was taught – "in order to be successful, you must study hard".

Growing up in a humble family, Mathew was able to attend an elite secondary school and become a first-generation HE student through his hard work at school. Reflecting one of the distinguishing features of working-class culture – hard work and a strong moral core (Gorman, 2000; Lamont, 2000; Lee, 2021) – Mathew exemplified how his virtues of good grades and hard work could help him pursue a brighter future. His disposition, however, did not allow him to excel in the emerging HE field as his focus on hard work had effectively prevented him from recognizing what was actually required by employers and society at large.

> A few months ago, when me and my friends in secondary school [from the middle-class] were discussing how we would be looking for work, I realised that they had a lot of experiences [on their CVs] . . . They had done a lot . . . internships, extra certifications and qualifications, and I have only one internship experience. It is as if I have wasted my time. [during HE]

After realizing the extent of his own disadvantage owing to his mismatched dispositions, Mathew was left with a sense of grief and a feeling of missing out.

Not all of the working-class respondents were highly invested in academic work; in fact, some seemed to have exhausted their perseverance to generate further capital after entering HE. This position was stated by William, for example, a first-generation HE student in an academic-oriented field:

> My mom used to drill into me to study hard [during secondary school] . . . I valued every opportunity for extra-curricular activities so that I did not have to stay at home and listen to her . . . I have done [an internship] once . . . It must be helpful . . . But honestly, as I have entered university now, I prefer spending more time on having fun. I will get my schoolwork done and hang out with my [secondary school] friends . . . go for a hike or something like that.

For William, pursuing HE may be a significant accomplishment in itself. As a result, he may not be inclined to actively seek out additional opportunities to generate capital in unfamiliar domains such as internships that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable to him.

Social class and the differences in social capital

In addition to cultural capital, social capital is also crucial in facilitating the respondents' enactments and acquisition of cultural dispositions towards internships. Being a member of a number of privileged social circles, the social resources of middle-class respondents provided them with encouragement as well as information on the pathways of involvement in internship. Specifically, the middle-class respondents' parents and peers socialized them to have favourable attitudes towards participating in activities that encourage the broadening of horizons and developing oneself without being self-restrained.

For the middle-class respondents, participating in an internship was a normative and taken-for-granted part of the HE experience. The utility and normativity of internships were transmitted through stories shared within the respondents' social circles. Richard, who had attended an elite secondary school before starting HE, explained the ways his friends in secondary school actively built their resumes: "I saw my friends in secondary school all trying to polish their resumes through internships, so I was motivated to catch up [with them]". Being a member of the middle class, Richard regarded internships as a taken-for-granted experience. Instead of questioning their necessity, he perceived internship as something common for university students and thus, benchmarking against the achievements of his middle-class peers. When questioned about the social class composition of his secondary school, Richard acknowledged that only a few of his classmates came from working-class backgrounds. This observation suggests that social stratification might have already occurred prior to the HE process, and it continues to have an impact during the HE and subsequent employment experiences.

Apart from the influence from peers, some middle-class parents also explicitly conveyed a favourable message about internships to their children. Teddy, for example, recalled how his mother unambiguously urged him to participate in an internship in his second year:

> In my second year, I had been travelling a lot, like every month, to different countries and was not involved in my schoolwork . . . I guess my mother was a little bit worried about how I was doing in school and my career. So, she would come up to me and ask if I had done any internship and if I needed any help with that.

What is telling in his narrative is his parents' active intervention in his preparation for future employment at the HE stage, which was reported by almost all of the middle-class respondents. In this process, given their own experience and connections in the workplaces, middle-class parents might transmit not only the importance of CV-building but also up-to-date information on "good, middle-class jobs", or simply, social expectations.

> Since they (my parents) are barristers, they have contacts with a wide range of people. People from different strata require the service of barristers, so they have more information [about different industries and occupations]. Also, due to their [privileged] social class status, [they] have considerably more information. [regarding workplaces]

In addition, the advantages of middle-class respondents in social resources provided them with a direct pathway to internship opportunities. Among the six middle-class respondents in this study, three obtained internships through family connections. For example, Teddy successfully secured an internship in a prestigious firm through his mother, an investment banker. As he described,

> She [my mother] has some clients, and they are friends with her. And her friends are of some status in this industry, so she asked them if I could be offered an internship in their company … [With this connection], I bypassed five rounds of interviews [for normal candidates] … And the supervisor just called me and said I could start working two weeks later.

Similarly, Richard secured three internships in prestigious companies through family ties. He was well aware of his privileged status compared to his peers: "Quite a lot of [prestigious] work opportunities were available to me only because my parents were acquaintances of people who were in powerful positions of their companies".

In contrast, the working-class respondents did not have such social resources. First, none of the working-class respondents had parents who were employed in white-collar positions or had HE experience. Also, none of their siblings had HE experience. In such circumstances, they could not receive personalized and effective advice about preparing for competition in the labour market and thus, might have felt content with their own comfort zone and lacked motivation to advance themselves. For example, when asked whether she thought her parents could help her to formulate a career goal or provide any advice, Emily clearly found it impossible to ask for help from her parents, who worked as clerks:

> I think they are out of touch with society, out of touch and unable to help … They do not know what employers require from candidates nowadays. Or they do not know what skills are necessary [for a white-collar job] … They themselves don't know how to use a computer … Even I am unclear [about employers' requirements], and since they know much less than me, they are not able to give any advice.

Emily's experience was common among her working-class peers, who found it difficult to talk to their parents about their future career paths, let alone receive practical advice for navigating employment competition.

In addition to the lack of information and empowerment from their social circles, the working-class respondents did not have social connections that could be drawn on for internship opportunities. "Naturally", working-class parents have fewer connections in white-collar workplaces. Therefore, the work opportunities they could provide their children might not be deemed worthwhile by respondents who wished to advance in "better" careers that match their higher educational attainment. For example, William discussed his experience as follows: First of all, I think my parents' jobs are undesirable, as they don't have bright prospects and they don't pay well. Moreover, I have a university qualification now, so I don't need to work in these [working-class] occupations. Working at a construction company and a local bakery store, William's parents' resources might not be able to help him to transcend their own achievements and prepare him to outcompete others in society. In fact, none of the working-class respondents in this study exploited their family connections to find internships or work opportunities. All of the working-class respondents interviewed had secured internship opportunities through non-compulsory institutional programmes and private job-seeking platforms. In this sense, despite being relatively disadvantaged among the HE population, their participation in HE still brought them exclusive opportunities through which they could equip themselves with new skills.

Social class and the differences in economic capital

In the interviews, none of the respondents, regardless of social class, explicitly discussed difficulties imposed by a lack of economic resources. However, while the middle-class respondents tended to aspire to unpaid internship opportunities, working-class respondents were more likely to target those with fair pay. In terms of the selection of internship, neither the middle-class nor working-class respondents referenced economic resources to explain their decisions; instead, they drew on their cultural and social resources to conceptualize their behaviours. Indeed, most of the working-class respondents interviewed were not engaging in internships and part-time work to alleviate financial pressure. However, the very absence of any discussion of economic capital may be a demonstration of taken-for-granted class advantages, which can be manifested not only in the freedom to choose

an unpaid internship but also in whether or not such work is even imagined in the first place. Another possibility may be that as all of the respondents had engaged in internships, those excluded from internships due to monetary considerations would not be in the sample. It is possible that economic capital plays a role in determining who participates in internships. This issue should be addressed in future research.

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing discussion on the relationship between students' class background and their views and experiences towards internship. In today's increasingly competitive labour market, respondents of all backgrounds are aware of the shift in HE rules that requires them to strive for extra capital through internship to better position themselves in the graduate recruitment market (e.g., Tomlinson, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Despite this shared perception, not all respondents in this study would or could, whether consciously and unconsciously, engage in this competition, due to their differentiated possession of social class resources. Using Bourdieu's three forms of capital, this study examines how respondents' class-based resources and their complex interplay affect their understanding and engagement towards internship. By examining the perception, experiences, and disposition of current and former students through this theoretical lens, this study provides evidence that the emerging competition for "soft credentials" in HE and the graduate employment market is not a level playing field for students from different class backgrounds. Our use of qualitative method uncovers the precise process and contexts in which social class affects students' employability through their participation in internships, an issue that is not easy to investigate using the dominant quantitative methods.

As demonstrated in this study, respondents' cultural and social resources play a prominent role in shaping their engagement in internships and further capital generation, which suggests that internships are becoming an increasingly important aspect of social reproduction in the context of broader educational expansion. While respondents have other social characteristics in addition to social class, the effect of the latter appears to be most prominent. Their choice of internship may be influenced by their fields of study, as they are often aligned with their career goals. However, regardless of their field of study, they tend to orient their internship participation towards their self-defined goals. For example, respondents from academic-oriented fields may seek a broader range of experiences, while those from professional-oriented fields may focus on opportunities aligned with their field of study. The most important element in their engagement is the existence of a self-defined goal and the cultural disposition and actual capacity to engage in activities that help them attain their goal. As demonstrated, the latter is closely related to their class-based cultural and social resources.

In fact, the disposition and capacity to use internships for strategic goal is crucially structured by social class and the complex interplay and conversion of the three forms of capital. Our findings highlight the role of embodied cultural capital in facilitating middle-class respondents' capacity to engage in the HE game and achieve further capital accumulation. Such embodied cultural capital can be further differentiated into the dispositions acquired before internships and the dispositions cultivated or reinforced through internships. Embodied cultural capital acquired before internships include middle-class respondents' internalization of the competitive logic of the credential competition and the rules of white-collar workplaces, which allow them to effectively orient their internship activities. In other words, middle-class respondents' pre-HE experiences in their social milieu, including primary and secondary school period, embed middle-class values such as the pursuit of excellence and the embrace of elitism and an independent and open-minded temperament. These advantages make them "fishes in the water" in the emerging game of internship. All these inspire the value – both strategic and non-strategic – of internship and let them get the most out of the experiences.

In contrast, working-class respondents tended to be less familiar with the dominant cultures within HE or possess cultural dispositions that did not align with the evolving educational and

employment landscape. Consequently, they might face challenges in understanding the dynamics of the internship game and effectively engaging in it. Some working-class respondents, motivated by a desire to conform to prevailing expectations, viewed internships as "rituals" of HE and might be unaware of the potential benefits they could offer. Some, being brought up in a cultural context that is alienated from the middle-class milieu, provided competing narratives against the dominant discourse of HE internship engagement. These cultural capital deficits among working-class respondents gave their middle-class peers an upper hand in this new HE game.

However, embodied cultural capital alone might not land middle-class respondents a desirable internship opportunity; other forms of capitals are required. For example, some of the middle-class respondents used their social capital in the form of family connections to access opportunities and personalized advice. Class-based networks of peers before HE also played a vital role in shaping their dispositions and preparing for their careers. These middle-class respondents were able to improve their employability by converting their cultural and social capital into new cultural capital in embodied (e.g., social competence) and institutionalized (e.g., an item in their CV) forms and into social (e.g., new connections) and human capital. Being members of various privileged social circles, middle-class respondents were constantly receiving favourable messages and opportunities to internship participation which shaped and reshaped their cultural disposition towards internship. In contrast, working-class respondents were generally less exposed to social networks favourable for internship engagement and gearing oneself for the employment market. While their family did have connections with their respective workplaces, the opportunities might not align with the career goals their children aspire to. While some working-class respondents might be able to become a member of the middle classes through hard work, such as in Mathew's case, their mismatched habitus might hinder them from exploiting the benefit of such network. In spite of a relatively lack of social capital, institutional social resources might provide a channel for working-class respondents to catch up with this capital deficit.

It should be noted that formal qualifications, as a form of institutional cultural capital, also play a key role in facilitating graduates' employment outcome. However, having mere qualifications or institutional cultural capital may be considered a given starting point. With the increasing emphasis on experience over credentials (Hart Research Associate, 2013), students are expected to demonstrate their possession of soft skills, which are developed through their higher education studies as well as other engagements such as internships.

Overall, we argue that middle-class students may possess a positional advantage in the graduate employment market. This argument is predicated on the assumption that their higher-quality engagement in internships and their ability to articulate their experiences as valuable forms of capital, aligning with employers' expectations, can potentially enhance their employment outcomes. This assumption resonates with Tchibozo's (2007, p. 55) emphasis on students' ability to recognize the strategic potential of extracurricular activities and leverage them to convey market benefits. Future investigations that explore the impact of internships on post-internship employment outcomes could be fruitful in bridging this empirical gap.

Lastly, there are some caveats when interpreting our findings. As suggested by Bourdieu, the value of capital depends on the fields in which it is applied. In this study, the career goals of the respondents were considered "traditional": long-term, middle-class, white-collar, office work. This study did not cater for other emerging forms of jobs, such as slasher, and how internship is relevant to them. Moreover, while this study aims to provide a wider picture of how social class structures students' internship experiences across fields, such focus may also lead to the neglect of the particularities of different fields and professions, where the same sets of skills may have diverse meanings. Therefore, while this study reveals that the general skills cultivated in internships are valued by students, future studies can elaborate on cross-field differences. Similar limitation applies to the particularities of institutions where future studies could investigate the cross-institutional differences in, e.g., institutional social capital and how it shapes HE students' horizons in developing their capital and

career (Waters & Leung, 2013). Additionally, future research should consider both the students' and employers' perspectives to enhance our understanding of the class reproduction process in the transition from higher education to the workforce. Lastly, further research can also be conducted in other Asian-Pacific regions where similar issues are less explored. (Blau & Duncan, 1967)

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