

MASTER'S THESIS

Segregation in physical and virtual spaces: a time-geographic study

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Segregation in Physical and Virtual Spaces:
A Time-Geographic Study

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for the degree of
Master of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Urban segregation has been a long-standing issue of public and academic concerns. Owing to the deep-rooted racial division and ghettoism in Western, especially US cities, the existing studies predominantly focused on residential segregation between ethnic groups. Relatively few studies have investigated segregation of other types and/or between social groups stratified by factors other than ethnicity. In general, the existing literature views segregation as a single facet issue, not comprehensive socio-spatial process unfolded in the daily life of individuals.

The shortcomings of existing segregation studies have become even more apparent when we take into consideration the new features and elements that have been added to urban segregation by the prevalence of Internet. On the one hand, Internet use may neutralize the disadvantaging effects of residential (or physical) segregation and promote social inclusion and integration; on the other hand, however, new forms of exclusion and segregation have been brought in by the Internet. While digital divide and inequalities are frequently mentioned and discussed in other social science fields, segregation in the virtual space is largely neglected in segregation studies. Since Internet has become an indispensable part of the daily life of most people today, this increasingly significant “virtual segregation” should gain more attention from researchers.

This study proposes and advocates a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective for segregation studies. Based on a discussion of the meaning, causes and consequences of segregation, it is argued that segregation studies should not be confined to analyzing residential segregation and segregation between predefined population categories. More debates and discussions on the concept are needed for a better understanding of the segregation issue. The thesis then proposes a broader definition of segregation, which makes a distinction between segregation caused by constraints/inequalities and that driven by individuals’ choices as well as recognizes that segregation occurs not only on the physical space but also in the virtual space.

Studying the multifaceted segregation requires more attention on people’s socio-spatial experiences and how they are exposed to or separated from each other in daily life. This study thus adopts a time-geographic approach and suggests a set of measures to examine the level of segregation (or the possibilities of interaction) in individuals’ everyday activity space. A case study was conducted using activity diary data collected from 770 respondents in Hong Kong in 2010. Cluster analysis is applied to identify the

actual segmentation of individuals by their exposure in daily life spaces. Findings support the hypotheses that a) segregation is a multifaceted process that is carried out concurrently in the various circumstances in physical and virtual spaces; b) segregation is highly individualized experiences that can be shaped by combined forces of multiple factors. It is also found that segregation is not necessarily related to unequal accessibility or social exclusion, but may also be driven by individuals' choice.

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