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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'One internship, two internships, three internships . . . more!': exploring the culture of the multiple internship economy

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ABSTRACT

Internships are increasingly promoted as a high impact practice to improve students' post-graduation employment outcomes, and educators often encourage students to participate in multiple internships. Yet, there is a lack of research on the sociocultural contexts associated with multiple internship participation. We present findings about the culture of multiple internship participation – drawing on focus groups and one-year follow-up interviews with students at five colleges in the United States, along with interviews with their educators and an analysis of online documents about multiple internship participation. The evidence documents a particular culture of the multiple internship economy, representing multiple internships as a linear, progressive, goal-oriented cultural project to accumulate a marketable self; also described by anthropologists as a neoliberal conception of the self. This cultural conception of a marketable neoliberal self is comprised of signs – such as narratives of multiple internships – that provide evidence of skills and experiences, of persevering through obstacles, and of 'hustle' and a 'do what it takes' attitude, which can be deployed to navigate competitive gatekeeping encounters such as employment interviews. Based on these findings, we develop a sociocultural theory of multiple internship participation as a project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation.

Introduction to the multiple internship economy

Growing research indicates positive outcomes for college students who are able to participate in internships, including employment (Nunley et al. 2016), academic achievement (Parker et al. 2016), and increased self-confidence and adaptability (Ocampo et al. 2020). Combined with the growing pressure on postsecondary institutions to cultivate students' 'employability' (Tomlinson and Holmes 2016), participation in internships is becoming one of the most influential ideas shaping higher education today. Internships are considered a high-impact educational practice (HIPs) with transformative outcomes for students; and Kuh and colleagues recommend a minimum of two HIPs across a college career, but ideally students would benefit most from one HIP per year of college (Kuh 2008; Gonyea et al. 2008).

The assumption regarding internships that 'more is better,' while uninvestigated, influences career advising on campuses and discourse online about internships, which promote multiple internships as a key strategy to orient to the employment market – a phenomena we describe as the culture of the multiple internship economy. As an example of the cultural logic of this mode of economic participation, 'One internship, two internships, three internships . . . more!' is the title of

a blog by a recent college graduate and peer career advisor on the website for the Public Relations Student Society of America. The author describes internships as an 'almost guaranteed way to get hands-on, relevant experience in the profession'; and continues, 'When I interview for positions after graduation, I will have a wide range of experience because the projects I completed for each employer were unique. The more internships you have, the more responsibility you will have for various projects' (Kara 2010).

While many educators and advisors increasingly encourage students to participate in multiple internships, researchers have only recently started to investigate whether, and under what circumstances, multiple internships are associated with additional positive student outcomes. Huber (2010) found that multiple different HIPs (including internships) were associated with a decreased time to graduation and an increased GPA at graduation. Townsley and colleagues' study at Mount Holyoke College (Elinore et al. 2017) found that students with multiple internships were more likely to be employed or to enter graduate school within six months of graduation. Silva et al. (2016) studied what they called a 'thin sandwich' approach to internships – participation in multiple short internship opportunities – and found that it leads to better employment outcomes than a single, long-term internship.

These few studies suggest that there may be added benefit to more than one internship, yet current research tends to leave unaddressed the question of barriers to participation in the multiple internship economy, and the motivations and experiences associated with students participating in multiple internships. Our data document the sociocultural contexts associated with the use of multiple internships to prepare for the employment market, further complicating the notion that 'more is better' in discussions of HIPs like internships. We ask the research question: What sociocultural factors are associated with multiple internship participation for college students?

This study analyzes interviews with educators (n = 39), and focus groups (n = 100) and one-year follow-up interviews (n = 41) with students from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study conducted at five universities in the states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. Data include four comprehensive universities, one of which is a private Historically Black College, and one a technical college. We also analyse a corpus of 14 internet documents such as websites and blogs posted online by career advisors and career entrepreneurs advocating for students to participate in multiple internships. Analyses of focus groups and interviews and internet discourse identify cultural assumptions associated with what anthropologists have described as a neoliberal conception of self (Gershon 2011), including values such as: prioritising the accumulation of skills and experiences; persevering through obstacles; displaying 'hustle' and a 'do what it takes' attitude; and pursuing a linear, progressive, and goal-oriented conception of education and careers.

We propose a conceptual framework to clarify the sociocultural factors associated with multiple internship participation, integrating anthropological research and theory on the culture of the neoliberal, late-capitalist economy (Gershon 2011), with sociological research on the process of social and institutional gatekeeping (Erickson 1976). We argue that these two conceptual lenses suggest a theory of multiple internships as *a cultural project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation*. Students employ multiple internships to cultivate a self that is comprised of marketable skills, experiences, and personal attributes; to navigate selective institutional and professional gatekeeping encounters; and access resources, employment in professional firms and organisations, and career advancement.

Multiple internships as a neoliberal gatekeeping navigation strategy

A college degree has long been associated with the socioeconomic reproduction of privileged class advantage and social mobility, providing a veneer of meritocratic legitimation for middle- and upper-class preferential access to the market (Brown 2000). With the democratization of higher education in past decades, and more students entering the employment market with similar educational profiles, college degrees have ceased to provide the competitive advantage

they once did (Tomlinson 2008). In responses, employers are increasingly hiring based on evidence of desired skills or personality attributes – a re-orientation of the employment market that scholars have called an 'economy of experience' (Brown and Hesketh 2004). In response to these same pressures, students increasingly work to 'add value and distinction' and 'marketability' to their credentials by accumulating credential enhancements, include evidence of extracurricular and leadership activities, high-impact educational practices, and work-based learning such as internships 'as an important tool for projecting a narrative of individual potential, competence and skill' (Tomlinson 2008, 57).

The anthropologist Gershon has described this project of accumulating skills and experiences as neoliberal form of agency, manifested by 'those who reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a business, tending to one's own qualities and traits' (Gershon 2011, 542). Neoliberalism is a social-political theory that emerged in the 1970s to become the dominant ideology in the United States, the core of which is the semiotic mapping of the logics, values, and practices of the market to other social institutions and cultural domains (Harvey 2007). Thus, a neoliberal concept of self is based upon the concept of the rational entrepreneur who strategizes their position within a competitive market, maximises their productivity, and communicates their value (Davies and Bansel 2007). This neoliberal conception of self has been incorporated into higher education, as institutions promote an idealised conception of the student, who accumulates 'skills,' 'experiences,' and other personal qualities to deploy on the post-graduation market (Urciuoli 2008, 2010). The strategy of pursuing multiple internships is one such practice of entrepreneurial self-management, by which students accumulate, cultivate, and deploy internships as signs of value within an increasingly competitive employment market.

Frenette (2015) identifies socioeconomic and legal factors that help account for the historic rise of the internship economy in the United States during the first decade of the 21st century, including an 11% increase of traditionally college-aged 18- to 24-year-olds and a rise in college enrolment from 36% to 42%. Such demographic trends indicate an increasingly competitive post-college employment market, coupled with the post-recession rise of temporary, non-standard employment arrangements (Kalleberg 2000). In this context, internships emerged as an market-based, employment-seeking strategy, which Frenette argues grew in prominence because of the legal ambiguity of employment status of interns, and the increasing prominence of experiential learning theory in higher education since the 1990s. Frenette writes, 'Internships now function as a sorting mechanism and credential system (at least in principle) aimed at rationalizing the transition from school to work, even in occupations that were previously excluded from work-based training schemes' (Frenette 2015, 355). In the 21st century, internships have become a gatekeeping mechanism to manage access to firms and professional employment.

Gatekeeping is a social selection process involving an encounter or series of encounters to which individuals submit themselves for access to institutions and resources (Erickson 1976). College advising or admissions encounters are examples of gatekeeping where advisors, professors, and others manage student access to credentialing prgrammes and institutional knowledge (Karen 1990), as are employment interviews (Roberts 2013). Research documents how raced, gendered, and classed linguistic and social dispositions can affect the results of gatekeeping encounters, constraining access to resources and institutions of class mobility (Roberts 2013).

Research on the role of internships in the employment market highlights their function as a gatekeeping mechanism. Internships provide a temporary, low-cost, low-risk opportunity for employers to assess interns' 'culture fit' (Hora 2020) and select them for regular employment (Zhao and Liden 2011). Research has documented how internships function as an entry point for regular employment within firms (Moss-Pech 2021). Further, studies in the United States found that individuals whose resume feature an internship are more likely to be selected for an interview, suggesting that internships signal employability to potential employers more broadly (Nunley et al. 2016). Social and economic barriers to internship access amplify the social-selection function; in particular, participation in competitive internships often requires social class-based knowledge,

habits, and social networks, and extensive financial resources for travel, relocation, and to pay expenses during an internship, which may be unpaid or inadequately paid (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019).

Our conceptual framework posits that multiple internship participation is a cultural project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation, signalling employability in a competitive employment market. In the next section, we describe methods we used to investigate the sociocultural factors that inform the culture and experience of the multiple internship economy.

Methods

Ongoing since 2018, the College Internship Study is a multi-site, mixed-methods, longitudinal study being conducted at 14 colleges and universities in the United States, that investigates the barriers, characteristics, and outcomes of colleges internships. The research procedures for the College Internship Study are reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and by those of the participating institutions. The study includes an initial survey and 1-year follow-up survey with a panel of students, an initial round of focus groups and 1-year follow-up interviews with a panel of students, and interviews with educators and employers about their work to support college internships. The data presented in this paper are the student focus groups and follow-up interview and interviews with educators, drawn from a selection of five study sites that exemplify postsecondary institutions with different missions, student populations, and geographic locations; which are postsecondary institutions in the states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin, including four comprehensive universities, one of which is a private Historically Black College, and one a technical college. Additionally, we conducted an online Google search for internet documents (blogs, articles, & websites) about multiple internship participation, which is also included within the data presented in this article.

Sampling strategies and data collection procedures

Participants in the College Internship Study were respondents to a survey on internship experiences sent to a sample of 1,250 students with junior or senior status who were randomly selected from the student directory, except for the private HBCU in South Carolina, where only 885 students met all screening criteria (so we sampled the total). This sample excluded students in programs with a required clinical practicum and apprenticeship programs (e.g., teaching training programs requiring a practicum, apprenticeship programs in skilled trades).

A letter with cash incentive was sent to students inviting them to participate in the survey, followed by a series of two email reminders for non-responders. Students who completed the survey received another letter with an additional cash incentive. A total of 1,547 students responded, with an average response rate of 26% (similar to the overall response rate across the 14 participating sites which is 24%); response rates of individual institutions varied from 18% to 42%. Non-response bias analysis was conducted for each site based on race and gender; no bias was detected. Of the students who responded to the College Internship Study survey, 32% of them had participated in an internship (n = 488) and the remainder had not (68%; n = 1059); 49% of those internships were in the private sector (n = 239), 30% in the non-profit sector (n = 148), and 21% in the government sector (n = 103); and the top 10 Industry Classifications (United States Census Bureau 2017) of those internships were Health Care and Social Assistance (16%; n = 77), Other Services except Public Administration (16%; n = 77), Educational Services (10%; n = 51), Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (9%; n = 45), Finance and Insurance (8%; n = 41), Information (8%; n = 41), Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation (7%; n = 34), Manufacturing (5%; n = 24), Public Administration (4%; n = 21), and Management of Companies and Enterprises (3%; n = 18). The top five academic Major Field Categories (National Survey of Student Engagement 2018) of the students who responded to the survey

Table 1. List of institutions.

Institution	Type	State	Number Students*	Number Survey Participants/ Response Rate	Focus Group Participants/ Follow-up interviews
#1	Private HBCU*	South Carolina	2000	198/23%	18 in 9 groups / 11 follow-ups
#2	Technical College	Wisconsin	18,000	384/31%	14 in 6 groups / 8 follow-ups
#3	Comprehensive University	Wisconsin	13,000	221/18%	19 in 13 groups / 10 follow-ups
#4	Comprehensive University	Wisconsin	4000	516/42%	25 in 12 groups / 9 follow-ups
#5	Comprehensive University	Maryland	2500	228 /18%	24 in 16 groups / 13 follow-ups

*Approximate number of undergraduate students or students at technical college. HBCU = Historically Black college/university.

were Business (30%; n = 462), Social Service Professions (13%; 193), Biological Sciences, Agriculture, & Natural Resources (11%; n = 168), Social Sciences (11%; n = 168), and Arts & Humanities (10%; n = 164).

After completing the survey, students were asked if they were willing to participate in a focus group (providing a $20 cash incentive). Focus groups comprised of 1–4 participants, included students who had taken an internship (n = 52) *and* those who had not (n = 48). A group of two or three researchers travelled to the institutions to conduct those focus groups and interviews in person. Additionally, a year after completion of the focus groups, we sent an email to all students who participated in a focus group to invite them to participate in a follow-up phone interview (providing a $40 cash incentive). We recruited 51 research participants. Table 1 shows the list of institutions and our sample of participating students featured in this article, and Table 2 gives demographic characteristics illustrating that the institutional population, survey sample, focus group sample, and follow-up interview sample are roughly comparable regarding key demographic variables. From among this sample of focus groups and follow-up interviews, we found that 24 students reported participating in multiple internships, whose experiences are the focus of the analysis presented in this paper.

Table 2. Total institutional population and study sample demographics.

	Institutional Population	Survey Respondents	Focus Groups	Follow-up Interviews
Observations	39,500*	n = 1547	n = 100	n = 51
Gender				
Male	59%	569 (36.8%)	41 (41%)	16 (31.4%)
Female	61%	961 (62.1%)	58 (58%)	34 (67.6%)
Other	NA	17 (1.1%)	1 (1%)	1 (2%)
Race				
American Indian, Alaska Native	1%	9 (0.6%)	0	0
Asian or Asian American	4%	101 (6.5%)	5 (5%)	4 (8%)
Black or African American	31%	341 (22%)	33 (34%)	19 (37%)
Hispanic or Latino	9%	110 (7.1%)	2 (2%)	2 (4%)
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.5%	2 (0.1%)	0	0
White or Caucasian	48%	929 (60.1%)	56 (56%)	24 (47%)
Two or more races	4%	22 (1.4%)	0	0
Other	2.5%	32 (2.1%)	0	0
Not listed	NA	1 (0.1%)	4(4%)	2 (4%)
First-generation status				
First-generation students	NA	618 (39.9%)	39 (39%)	16 (31%)
Continuing-generation students	NA	926 (59.9%)	61 (61%)	35 (69%)
Not listed		3 (0.2%)	0	0

*Approximate number of undergraduate students or students at technical college.

Through email recruitment and snowball sampling, we recruited 38 educators and career advisors from the five research sites for an in-person or phone interview in which they discussed their work to support college internships. We also collected online documents related to the topic of multiple internships by conducting a Google search in May of 2020 employing the phrase 'multiple internships,' and identified 14 blogs, career advice columns, and other webpages that discussed the topic of multiple internships.

Focus group and follow-up interview protocol

Focus group sessions lasted approximately 1 hour and were moderated by one or two researchers using a semi-structured protocol that included questions about students' background, academic programs, and career goals. For students who had taken an internship, questions were asked about their motivations for pursuing an internship, the nature of their work in the internship, and obstacles to internship success. Students without an internship experience were asked about general perceptions about internships and their future careers; one question focused on obstacles to internship participation. The one-year follow-up phone interview protocol included questions to document their education, career development, employment experiences in the past year, questions about any obstacles to their education and career success, if they had participated in a first or subsequent internship, and questions about their internship experiences. The answers of students who participated in multiple internships to questions about challenges, motivations, and experiences with internship participation provided the bulk of the data for qualitative analyses. Additionally, the qualitative data for this article includes educator and advisor interviews, which contained questions regarding how internship programs are organised and supported on campus, about their work, reasoning, concerns about supporting student internships, and about the messages that they communicate to students regarding internships.

Analytic strategies

Discourse analysis

The analysis of the online documents about multiple internships collected for this study follows an approach generally described as Critical Discourse Analysis, which focuses on identifying how units of discourse – typically words, phrases, and larger linguistic structures such as narratives – are a component of larger social processes that implicate culture, ideology, and power relations (Mullet 2018). After collecting the online data and compiling the corpus of texts, we followed an iterative process of reviewing the texts, annotating recurrent words, themes, and concepts, and identifying how the discourse features both connect to the social context of the text's production and produce an argument about the social world (Fairclough 2001). We engaged this process of annotating, contextualising, and interpreting multiple times, while simultaneously compiling an analytical memo that integrated our discourse analysis of the online documents with the larger research question of the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors of multiple internship participation.

Focus group and follow-up interview analysis

Qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts proceeded through a multi-step process, using MaxQDA software. First, we segmented the transcripts into manageable units based on the topics of the semi-structured protocol. Two researchers independently segmented three randomly selected transcripts and then met to compare coding results and reconcile any disagreements. The two researchers then segmented the entire corpus of data independently. Next, the pair of researchers engaged in a round of inductive, open coding of approximately half of the transcripts, noting recurrent phrases, ideas, and observations related to obstacles inhibiting participation in an internship (Corbin and Strauss 2014; Ryan and Russell Bernard 2003).

Throughout this open coding process, the researchers compiled analytical memos with themes related to barriers to internship participation. Based on themes derived from the analytical memos, the analysts generated a codebook that was reviewed and discussed among the entire research team. Then, the pair of researchers each applied this codebook to three transcripts, and found 88% agreement in their application of the codebook across the data. This process of establishing inter-rater reliability also included refining definitions of individual codes and rules for applying them to the text. The researchers then worked independently to apply the codes to the entire corpus (Campbell et al. 2013). Throughout this process, researchers continued to build analytical memos to integrate the data into emerging research findings. The emerging analysis and data were presented and discussed at research team meetings to help develop interpretations and to confirm or dispute emergent findings.

Results

Analysis of online discourse data

The online documents collected for this study attribute a variety of positive characteristics to the multiple intern, including accumulation of 'skills' and 'experiences' that will constitute a maximally marketable self. This discourse is widely promulgated by for-profit career development and recruitment companies, which provide 'the right tools' and 'strategies,' including resume review, interview coaching, and workshops, to support individuals in their job search and career advancement. LiveCareer's blog (Hansen 2020a), for example, advises 'You simply must do an internship (better yet: multiple internships)!' Several themes recur in these representations of multiple internships by the for-profit career development industry, constituting a culture of the multiple internship economy. Characteristics of this discourse include its optimistic emotional key, which represents the relationship between multiple internships and career success as unambiguous, natural, and inevitable. Multiple internships are portrayed as 'the key' to career success, which 'drastically improves the odds of being hired soon after college' (Leach 2020). As one career entrepreneur explains, 'Multiple internships that have been optimized are the gateway to accomplishing the primary goal of going to college in the first place . . . successful employment;' moreover, multiple internships provide 'the chance to showcase the value they can add to that respective brand daily' (Leach 2020).

Career entrepreneurs describe the enhanced individual marketability that internships provide within an increasingly competitive employment marketplace. As stated on the Career Alley website:

> You have invested a substantial amount of money and time into your education and degree. Make sure that you continue to strive for excellence by mastering multiple internships. Doing so will make you more marketable and attractive to potential employers (Career Alley 2020).

Students are encouraged to use their internship to display highly desirable personality characteristics – such as the willingness to 'go the extra distance,' 'have what it takes,' and 'handle the nitty-gritty,' all of which translate into interns needing to 'complete tasks during off-hours like evenings and weekends,' often without compensation (Leretto 2018). Another career entrepreneur (McManus 2019) advises students that while internships are a 'surefire way to get noticed on the job market' by demonstrating 'initiative, work ethic, and maturity' – and the highly prized personality characteristic of 'hustle' – to potential employers, it is wrong to 'try to nab as many as you can.' Rather, to avoid appearing overzealous, indecisive, and overqualified, students should aim for the 'sweet spot' of 'no more than three' internships prior to going on the employment market; that is, when if comes to the strategy of multiple internships, select 2–3 opportunities and 'think about quality over quantity.'

Importantly, representations of the multiple internship strategy are teleological, discursively configured as a linear, progressive accumulation of more value – in the forms of more skills, connections, and credibility in the market. For example, one career entrepreneur blogger (Hansen 2020b) narrates the many internship experiences of marketing student Julie, who was interested in

a career in the music business. The narrative is structured by a progressive teleological framework, displayed by the blog's title, 'Addicted to internships: How one college student just said no to service jobs and started *building a career one internship at a time*' (emphasis ours). The blogger asks the question, 'Would you have the courage to swear off typical college restaurant and retail jobs and commit yourself to career-boosting internships – even unpaid internships?' A career is represented as something that is built 'one internship at a time;' a process that requires 'courage' and 'commit-[ment]' rather than more material factors such as financial and other resources, social networks, and social and institutional support. Julie started with an unpaid radio promotions internship that was not a positive experience. 'I put all the effort I had into helping out here and there – working extra hours, helping in the office, staying late before big events,' but 'interns were mostly discriminated against instead of taught valuable lessons.'

A key feature of this type of discourse is that discriminatory, predatory, or abusive practices in the internship labour market are represented as a learning opportunity for students. 'The experience did show . . . [Julie] the direction into which she does not want to venture,' and provided the opportunity to build her resume, explains the blogger. Julie's second internship was a marketing position for an international company, an experience she foregrounded in the process of obtaining her third internship, an unpaid position in the music industry in New York City. This internship was even more exploitative. Unpaid and unsupervised, Julie and the other interns were themselves made responsible for their co-interns' work. Because of this culture of peer monitoring, all interns were collectively evaluated based on one another's work. The narrative represents such internships, and several more that follow in Julie's story, as an accumulation of knowledge and marketability, which ultimately results in optimal career positioning.

Websites and blogs of career entrepreneurs, and other online sources, promote the cultural project of accumulating and managing personal marketability. Within this context, the strategy of obtaining multiple internships is represented as a sign of self-marketability to be deployed on the employment market – a form of neoliberal agency particular to the culture of the late-capitalist economy (Gershon 2011). Students deploy such signs of marketability to manage the classed, gendered, and raced gatekeeping encounters that guard the professional employment market.

The next section presents evidence from educators and career advisors who participated in our study, on how they value and message the strategy of multiple internships to their students.

Interviews with educators

The educators we interviewed at the five sites for this study describe speaking to students about internships as a key part of enhancing one's 'employability' (Tomlinson and Holmes 2016). This messaging reflected prominent discursive features of the career entrepreneurial discourse described above, with an additional focus on the role of internships as 'providing value' to students and as an institutional outcome. As one career advisor explained, 'Students are more likely to be employed if they have internship experience. And I believe that our campus values the employment rate of our students.' The educators and advisors in our sample of interviews warn students that 'getting good grades may not be enough,' and emphasise the value of internships 'to help our students gain more meaningful employment upon graduation;' to 'develop the skills . . . so that they would be highly marketable and employable;' to 'show employers that you are able to learn, able to do the job;' and to 'show employers that they [interns] could be a good fit' for regular employment. This sample of language from our interviews reflects features of an employability discourse deployed by educators and advisors more generally; as one career advisor explains to his students, internships are 'part of a formula that's going to distinguish you' within a competitive employment market.

A 'strong suggestion to do an internship or two is a part of all those pillars I think that we recommend,' says a professor of business at a four-year comprehensive university in our sample. He identified three pillars of employability as academic achievement, community engagement, and multiple internships, explaining that '[f]or a lot of corporate employers, it's not just a degree, it's

having a GPA over 3.0 and those internships would be meaningful. And, then the third part of that would be making a difference on the campus and being involved.' Internships thus demonstrate to prospective employers the student's ability and commitment to work hard and learn a new job.

The educators and advisors in our sample recommend students participate in multiple internships if possible; they embed this strategy within a larger discourse of employability and of education as a neoliberal project to accumulate a marketable self. However, educators are well aware of the time, financial, and social constraints that their students face when participating in one internship, let alone several. Educators discussed concerns that some students may not be able to participate in internships. As one career advisor explains, 'You don't necessarily have the opportunity if you're trying to do a career change to do an internship, because you have bills, family, and all that stuff. So that's very difficult to do.' Educators worked to identify paid internships for such students, or to identify internships with flexible scheduling to accommodate complex academic, family, and work obligations.

Focus groups and follow-up interviews with students

In our sample of 100 focus group participants and 51 one-year follow-up interviews, 24 students reported participating in multiple internships. We use qualitative data from these 24 participants to examine the sociocultural factors that influence multiple internship participation. Through coding and analysis, we identified three recurring themes, which we discuss below and link to individual student case studies.

Theme 1: the accumulation of internships as a sign of employability

Students describe pursuing a strategy of accumulating multiple internships to sign employability. By including internships on their resumes or in narratives to prospective employers, they show that they can 'hit the ground running,' as one student explains. Some students with the available time and resources may pursue more than two internships to make a compelling case for future employment. Across the institutions in this study, several academic programs tended to encourage their students to accumulate as many internships as possible, including programs in business colleges, in creative disciplines such as theatre, design, communications and media, and in IT-related programs. Some students express feeling 'pressure' from their professors to do multiple internships, while others embrace the culture and discourse of crafting a marketable self through multiple internships.

Our team conducted a follow-up interview with Greg, a business management student with a concentration in finance, after he graduated from college, when he had started both an MBA programme and his fifth internship with a new company with prospects for full-time employment. Greg began his internship trajectory during high school (internship #1) as a paid marketing intern for a tool manufacturer. He was responsible for maintaining the online catalogue and conducting dealership surveys. He enrolled at a local technical college before transferring to university for his undergraduate degree. He interned (#2) with the business college's outreach program, orienting transfer students and incoming freshmen. He then moved on to an unpaid for-credit internship (#3) with the university newspaper, overseeing their budget and spending. Simultaneously, he began a (#4) paid internship with a manufacturer and retailer of clothes, tracking fulfilment and operational costs for their e-commerce department. He hoped to eventually transition this internship into permanent employment, 'to grow with the company. . . . I want to get into different positions within a company and move up the ladder.' However, he was not successful in obtaining such a position, even though 'it looked so promising.' Greg describes discussing his multiple internship experiences in the interview for his most recent internship position (#5) at a beverage distribution company:

> I walked into that interview knowing absolutely nothing and then I walked out with a job. . . . I got halfway through my resume, and this is—I will attest to this to the day I die, for college students, do the free [unpaid] internships because I got two internships into my resume. He [the interviewer] told me to stop, he said, "Greg," I quote, he said, "Greg, stop right there. Do you want the job?"

Greg strongly advocates for taking multiple internships, even if they are unpaid, 'because they definitely pay off and they [prospective employers] do look at those.' For him, internships were also a way to 'get ahead of the curve.' He believes that his accumulation of multiple internships has taught him 'a lot about my work ethic' and 'perseverance' to overcome challenges – and that internships as part of a resume and narrative of experience can show employers that you are capable of doing the job.

Theme 2: multiple internships as a linear progressive accumulation of employability

In comparison with apprenticeships and clinical practicums in the United States, the internship labour market is highly unregulated (Frenette 2015), thus there is considerable variation in the quality of internship experiences (O'Neill 2010). Furthermore, many students may lack access to the professional social networks and knowledge needed to obtain a quality internship that is relevant to their career goals, and such internships may be especially competitive, in some cases requiring prior internships and voluntary or leadership experiences (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019).

In fact, several students in our sample were able to leverage unpaid internships or other voluntary work experiences to acquire more competitive paid internships. Students who participated in multiple internships, where low-quality experiences preceded a subsequent higher quality internship experience, describe even their extremely negative experiences as part of a progressive process of accumulating more knowledge, skills, connections, and competitiveness in the employment market.

Sam is an architecture and design student. His professors strongly encouraged multiple internships, and professional networking in general, as strategies to enter the employment market. His first internship was for a small interior design firm, 'a mom and pop shop' where he was 'doing other people's busy work' – organising shelves, printing documents, and making copies. 'It was easy, but it wasn't something that I was enjoying doing,' Sam says. He left at the end of the summer on good terms with his supervisors. He continued networking with design professionals online, wrote a blog on the design profession, and was able to use his expanded networks, experience, and knowledge to access an internship at a well-known design firm. There, he engaged with design professionals and worked to support actual design projects. Despite his dissatisfying early internship experience, through his multiple internship strategy – supplemented with additional professional and online networking – Sam accumulated credibility and connections. He was able to access a desired firm as an intern, where he gradually transitioned to regular employment as a design professional working on independent projects.

A central feature of discourse regarding multiple internships is the progressive nature of the process. No matter how meaningless, exploitative, or even hostile an internship experience might be, even bad internships accumulate value within the cultural framework of the multiple internship economy.

Kim interned at large insurance company in a project to evaluate changes to their customer service operation. The project involved project management and team collaboration skills, but also writing and checking computer code. She struggled with what she felt were the sexist biases of her supervisors and fellow team members, and she complained that she would constantly receive what she called 'highly gendered feedback.' For example, she explains, 'The only feedback . . . [was] "don't step on anybody's toes . . . don't be too aggressive. Communicate this way. Work on your presentation style," but no one ever worked on . . . my technical skills, which is what I was there to learn.'

While the other interns received offers of permanent employment, Kim did not. She felt that the experience taught her a lot about the kind of office culture she wanted to work in, and despite not receiving a job offer, she was able to use the reference to obtain a second internship working on the website for a branch of the United Nations, where she is thriving.

Theme 3: multiple internships as a strategy to navigate institutional gatekeepers

Frequently, students accessed a firm or organisation first as an intern, then negotiated the transition to regular employment. This observation aligns with prior evidence that employers use internships as the review and selection process of a hiring pipeline (Zhao and Liden 2011) and that students

access regular employment through internships (Moss-Pech 2021). The students in our study reported using multiple internships as a strategy to navigate competitive gatekeeping encounters – such as employment interviews – not only to gain initial access to a firm, but also to reach a desired position within a firm where they were already employed.

Bill graduated from an IT Support Program at the technical college in our study. As part of his program requirements, he completed an internship as an IT support technician at a help desk. Shortly after graduating, he received employment at a call centre for IT support. He disliked this position, describing it as 'not exactly a fit' where 'management treated me like expendable.' In order to gain further specialisation, 'move up the ladder' within his field, and gain access to more responsible positions, Bill enrolled in an IT Cloud Support Program. At the same time, he took a second unpaid internship at his former internship site. There, he has now moved up to an unpaid intern management position, working 30–40 hours per week on a voluntary basis. On the side, he is applying for regular employment. Bill has used a large amount of unpaid labour at his internship site to move up to a more responsible position and 'acquire more skills to put on my resume . . . because it shows I can do the job.' This way, he hopes to transition into paid regular employment in his desired role of IT Cloud Support.

Similarly, Serena wanted to become a medical coder at the major hospital and clinic in town, but her lack of experience in the healthcare field thwarted her employment prospects. She had already graduated from a Medical Administrative Specialist Program and had repeatedly passed the needed Civil Service exam with top scores. She was invited to interview for several positions, but always was denied because of her lack of work experience in the medical field:

> They interviewed me, like, the first three times and the fourth time the interviewer called me and was like, "Hi Serena! Have you received any experience working in the health care industry?" I was like, "No, but if you hire me, I can get that." And she was like, "No, it doesn't work that way." That was six years ago. . . . It's like being on a treadmill. You cannot get into the health care industry if [you lack] . . . that background.

Serena used the strategy of multiple internships to navigate this frustrating catch-22 situation. She interned as a medical administrative specialist in the clinic, which provided her access to the institution and experience within the healthcare field. Thanks to her internship, Serena was offered regular employment as a Medical Program Assistant, but she still hopes to acquire a position in her desired role as a Medical Coding Specialist.

Discussion

Our goal in this paper was to contribute new insights into the factors that influence multiple internship participation among college students. Below, we highlight key findings of the study and ways that the sociocultural theory developed in this paper clarifies the role of multiple internship participation as a neoliberal gatekeeping navigation strategy. We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The small sample of five institutions precludes generalisations to higher education in the United States more generally. Such generalisations are also problematic given the non-random selection of students and educators, who self-selected to participate in the study. Further, while the focus group and follow-up interview data are informative, the study would benefit from a fine-grained analysis of students' decision-making and experiences with multiple internships that could be derived from a life-historical or ethnographic account of student behaviour.

The socioeconomic contexts of multiple internship participation

A growing body of literature associates internship participation with important academic, psycho-social, and employment outcomes (Nunley et al. 2016; Ocampo et al. 2020; Parker et al. 2016). Internships are often considered an important high-impact practice (HIP) that enhances employ-ability; advocates of HIPs such as internships recommend multiple experiences across a student's

academic career (Kuh 2008; Gonyea et al. 2008). Yet, there is still little evidence that multiple HIPs (cf. Huber 2010), or multiple internships in particular (cf. Silva et al. 2016; cf. Elinore et al. 2017), are associated with additional positive student outcomes. Despite the limited evidence base, this article documents the messaging – that one internship is good, but more is better (though ⊁ 3 for some advocates, McManus 2019) – which is directed at students and others engaged in career preparation. This difference between the cultural messaging about the added value of multiple internship participation, and the scant evidence of that value in terms of positive outcomes to students, is particularly concerning given robust research evidence that internship participation poses social, financial, and institutional barriers to internship participation, as systematically 'closing the doors to opportunity' for some students (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019). More research is needed both on the outcomes of multiple internship participation, as well as on how barriers to multiple internship participation may operate to exclude some students based on their socioeconomic background.

Contributions to a sociocultural theory of multiple internship participation

We propose a conceptual framework that identifies multiple internship participation as a strategy of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation. Multiple internship participation is represented through online discourse, and by educators and students, as a linear, progressive, accumulation of value – and that narratives of multiple internship participation tend to encompass or minimise negative, exploitative, or otherwise unsuccessful internship experiences within a more uplifting teleological narrative of student growth, progress, and development. Research on the narrative restructuring of internship experiences by students, educators, advisors, and career entrepreneurs promises to be a generative area of research, by analysing the particular discursive features and strategies that promote the neoliberal culture of the multiple internship economy. The qualitative research presented in this paper also documents how students utilise multiple internships as a strategy to accumulate marketability and competitive advantage, in particular by displaying an employable persona characterised by persistence, strong work ethic, hustle, conscientiousness, independent self-management, and a professional demeanour. Multiple internships are thus deployed as a sign, both to navigate selective gatekeeping encounters to access firms and organisations, and to access particular employment roles with the firm. This theory highlights the role of multiple internship participation in students navigating – and employers managing – the social selection process of gatekeeping professional firms and organisations (Erickson 1976; Roberts 2013; Zhao and Liden 2011).

Research is needed on the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that influence and constrain students' abilities to adopt the project of multiple internship participation as a strategy to accumulate an employable self. In addition to the financial and other socioeconomic constraints faced by low-income students participating in internships (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019), Frenette (2013) found that the unstructured approach to supervision in music industry internships may be particularly challenging for first-generation or other minoritized college students, who may be uninformed through their own networks about the need to seek out additional work without direction in order to display the 'go getter' disposition of an ideal intern (Frenette 2013). Thus, research is needed to explore how social classed-, raced-, and gendered-based habits, dispositions, and knowledge affect the experiences and outcomes of multiple internship participation. Our research in this topic regarding barriers to first-internship participation (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019; Wolfgram, Vivona, and Akram 2021), indicates that students often face multiple barriers simultaneously, which can be compounded by systems of power and disadvantage faced by minoritized students. This research strongly suggests that intersectional analyses of barriers to internship participation are needed to identify how barriers may become amplified for particular students based on their classed, raced, and gendered minoritization – and barriers to multiple internship participation are likely to be even more problematic for such students.

Multiple internship participation as a career development strategy

Overall, our investigation indicates a need to further interrogate the aggressive advocacy for students to participate in multiple internships. While internships may add value to students' education and career development, it may not be reasonable to expect students to participate in multiple internships to gain favourable positioning in the post-graduation employment market – especially because the quality of internships is so varied (O'Neill 2010) and the need for additional personal resources to participate in internships is so high (Hora, Wolfgram, and Chen 2019). We suggest that educators and advisors refrain from advocating multiple internships as a career development strategy. Should future research indicate that multiple internships are reliably associated with important positive student outcomes, then all constituents of the internship process – educators, advisors, administrators, internship supervisors and mentors, policymakers, scholars, and the students themselves – must collaborate to ensure that all internships are high quality and impactful to the students, and that resources are in place to remove social and economic obstacles to multiple internship participation.

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