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A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Chinese College Students' Self-Presentation on Social Networking Sites

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Social media have provided new means of self-presentation. Because individuals are able to post notes, pictures, and videos, social media users can construct their personal images on social networking sites (SNSs) and build links with their various communities. This study aims to find out how Chinese college students perceive other users' online self-presentations and how they conduct their own self-presentations through posting pictures on SNSs. Using photo-elicitation as the primary methodology, the authors conducted two focus groups with male and female participants respectively. With grounded theory as the framework, the qualitative data show gender differences in the attitudes towards extreme self-presentation, social media effects, and the motives of online photo-based self-presentation among the participants. Theoretical and practical implications are further discussed.

Keywords: self-presentation, qualitative, photo-elicitation, social networking sites (SNSs), Brunswik's Lens Model, gender differences

Introduction

Talented as she is, Lady Gaga is also known for her flamboyant and undaunted style. The images she has used to present herself through media lenses are unique, bold, determined, and inspiring. There is a similar group of flashy camera subjects in China. However, rather than celebrities or public figures, they are "grassroots" individuals represented by Furong Jiejie (also known as "Sister Lotus") and Fengjie (also known as "Sister Phoenix"), both of whom rose to fame by posting extreme pictures of themselves online. Sister Lotus—known for her wild online antics, horrible dancing, overweight and over-exposed figure, and narcissistic behavior—was listed alongside a top entrepreneur, a best-selling author, and an Olympic champion as China's most popular online figures. As part of this honor, she was invited to give a speech by Peking University (Xinhua News, 2009). Sister Phoenix, in similar navel-gazing fashion, challenges the Chinese people's traditional values and was regarded as a Chinese Internet celebrity with 1.4 million followers on Sina Weibo, also known as Chinese

Twitter (Bennett, 2011). Despite their popularity, online audiences are generally overwhelmed by these figures' extravagant self-confidence and astonishing self-identity representation.

As extreme as the case of Sister Lotus or Sister Phoenix might sound, online self-image representation is part of daily life for each individual, as social media have become an important component of everyday life. This is especially true among Chinese college students, who form opinions of one another based on what's presented on the social networking sites' (SNSs) profiles. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (2012), 62.5% of Chinese social media users are under the age of 30. Therefore, how young Chinese college students studying abroad construct their self-identities and perceive others' online self-image presentations on SNSs will be the focus of this study.

Online self-presentations go beyond text-based descriptions with the profile photograph being a central component of online self-presentation (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Prior research has mostly focused on profile pictures (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Hum, Chamberlin, Hambright, Portwood, Schat, & Bevan, 2011; Siibak, 2010; Strano, 2008) which compose only a small proportion of the photos posted on SNSs. In addition, this study's context will focus on China, a collectivistic culture, where people tend to be shy and passive in social settings (Cho & Park, 2013; Hofstede, 1980; Kim, Coyle, & Gould, 2009). Thus, this study aims to examine how Chinese college students present themselves and perceive others from a visual perspective in order to provide insights as to how social media influence their behaviors and attitudes towards self-presentation. Moreover, as males and females behave and perceive differently in their self-presentation (Belk, 1991; Schlenker, 1986), gender difference will also be investigated.

Literature Review

Brunswik's Lens Model

In the current study, photographs posted on social media were used as the elicitation tool for group discussion. Although participants had not met these pictures' owners in the real world, these pictures serve as cues for users' judgment. Brunswik's Lens Model (Brunswik, 1956; Gigerenzer & Kurz, 2001) is the theoretical framework applied in this research to understand how observers perceive the presenters based on the photos in online virtual spaces. This model conceptualizes the process whereby observers make judgments about the characteristics of others based on the links between occupants and their personal environments. According to this model, individuals' behaviors and belongings are regarded as environmental cues which provide observers with a lens to make inferences about these individuals' personalities. That objective cues can be used by observers to per-

ceive physical or social reality in either an accurate or inaccurate way leads to the discussion of cue validity, cue utilization, and functional achievement. Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, and Morris (2002) conceptualized cue validity as the “link between the observable cue and the occupant’s actual level of underlying construct,” and cue utilization as the “link between the observable cue and an observer’s judgment” (p. 380) because observers do not depend on all possible cues in making their judgments about others (Walther, Van, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Walther et al. (2008) further conceptualized that when an environmental cue accurately reflects a target’s underlying personality characteristics, that cue is considered to be valid. Therefore, observers are considered to have made an accurate judgment when both cue validity and cue utilization come into play. Such accuracy is referred to as functional achievement in Brunswik’s (1956) model.

Brunswik’s Lens Model has been widely used as a theoretical framework to understand how people make judgments of others’ personalities based on physical, vocal, and virtual elements. Scherer (1978) applies the Brunswik Lens Model to the inference of personality from voice and concludes that there is some degree of functional validity in the extroversion attribution from voice quality. Gosling et al. (2002) draw on the logic of the lens model to explain the personality judgments based on individuals’ physical surroundings and to further explain how personal environments function as repositories of individual expression, which enables observers to draw inferences about the occupants. The four parallel mechanisms proposed by Gosling et al. (2002) linking individuals to the environments they inhabit sheds light on the personality judgment based on environmental cues which are self-directed identity claims, other-directed identity claims, interior behavioral residue, and exterior behavioral residue. Self-directed identity claims are defined as “symbolic statements made by occupants for their own benefit,” while other-directed identity claims are understood as “symbols that have shared meanings to make statements to others” (Gosling et al., 2002, p. 380). Further, self-directed and other-directed claims usually lead to similar environmental manifestations. Gosling et al. (2002) referred to the interior behavioral residue as the “physical traces of activities conducted in the [immediate] environment” and the exterior behavioral residue as the behaviors “performed by the individual entirely outside of those immediate surroundings” (p. 381). The four mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, the photos posted on the SNSs are regarded as both identity claims and interior behavioral residue since users satisfy themselves within virtual space. Because users of SNSs select pictures based on different criteria and with different motivations, they can create a unique style of SNSs virtual space by sharing a certain type of picture. By viewing the posted pictures of various types, observers may form different impressions of the presenters. Moreover, as social media audiences, males and females may demonstrate different attitudes when viewing

others' images for self-presentation. Even though previous studies brought insight to gender differences in usage and self-disclosure on social media, limited research has probed into this issue. Therefore, the authors dig into the gender difference of young Chinese social media users in perceiving others' online self-presentations which remains "unknown." This approach leads to the first research question:

RQ1: How do Chinese college students perceive others' personal images through the pictures and photos posted on social networking sites? Is there any gender difference among them in perceiving others' image-based self-presentation?

Self-Presentation in Online Context

Self-presentation is a process by which individuals engage in impression management and information control in everyday life (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). A large body of research has examined the relationship between self-presentation and impression management in virtual environments (Cunningham, 2013; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Madill, 2010; Pujazon-Zazik, Manasse, & Orrell-Valente, 2012; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008) and on social media in particular, including blogs (Brivio & Ibarra, 2009; Chen, 2010; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; McCullagh, 2008) and SNSs (Boyle & Johnson, 2010; Chen & Marcus, 2012; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Siibak, 2010). Researchers found that self-presentation can be influenced by multiple factors such as self-determination (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005), self-monitoring (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Leary & Allen, 2011; Lippa & Mash, 1981), and gender similarity (Leary, Nezelek, & Downs, 1994).

In virtual environments, research has confirmed that personality is an important factor influencing people's self-presentation. Krämer and Winter (2008) found from their study based on a German social website that the more extroverted people are, the more "experimental" profile pictures (making a face, striking a pose) they have. In addition, narcissists that were rated by others as more physically attractive showed a higher frequency of status updates and posting photos (Ong et al., 2011). Such users also have the expectation of creating a positive impression influencing the level of profile details, the size of their contact list, and the style of profile pictures (Krämer & Winter, 2008). More specifically, people with low expectations chose photos with serious facial expressions without a background (portrait), whereas those with high expectations tended to present party pictures and the "experimental" types.

Community type has been identified as another important factor in online self-presentation. Schwammlein and Wodzicki (2012) found that in

an online community centered on interpersonal relations among its members, people presented themselves in an individualizing manner. However, in a community based on people's collective characteristics, social categories, or specific purposes, members tend to focus on characteristics shared among members of the community. Generally, people are more willing to get in contact with others in the former community than the latter.

Self-presentation also differs across cultures (Kim & Papacharissi, 2003). Chen and Marcus's (2012) study revealed that the individuals from collectivistic cultures who were less extroverted and less interactive in an online environment disclosed the least honest and the most audience-relevant information as compared to the users from individualistic cultures. Chu and Choi (2010) confirmed that there was an impact of culture on online self-presentation strategies. In the comparative study of Chinese and American SNS users, they found that while showing competence, supplication, and ingratiation were identified as three major strategies among users of both countries, Chinese users employed the supplication strategy more frequently than their American counterparts, while American users exhibited a heavier use of the ingratiation strategy.

Those studies provide factors (personality, community types, and cultures) that need to be taken into consideration when we explain the individual differences in selecting photos on SNSs. However, few studies have explored the young Chinese social media users' motivations in posting pictures on SNSs and the reasons why they choose not to reveal certain information about themselves, which are the theoretical gaps that the present study aims to fill.

Gender Difference in Online Self-presentation

Previous research identified the gender difference in self-disclosure (Belk, 1991), a concept closely related to self-presentation (Schlenker, 1986). Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, and Schmitt (2001) suggested that women tend to use the Internet mainly for interpersonal communication while men do so more for information-seeking purposes. Inconsistent with the findings of Jackson et al. (2001), Haferkamp, Sabrina, Papadakis, and Kruck (2012) argued that men focused on the pragmatic functions of SNSs and were prone to use it to find friends, while women demonstrated a hedonist use, concentrating on entertainment and self-presentation. Women were more willing to disclose information about themselves than men. However, females were also found to be more concerned about privacy than males (Child, 2007); males are more likely to disclose to strangers and acquaintances, while females are more willing to disclose to more intimate friends (Stokes, Fuehrer, & Childs, 1980). Moreover, Stefanone and Lackaff (2009) found that women shared more photos online than men on SNSs. With regards to the profile photos on SNSs, women preferred adding por-

trait photos to their profiles while men like choosing full-body shots (Haferkamp et al., 2012).

Visual Self-Presentation on SNSs

Visual content such as photos displayed online plays an important part of self-presentation. Prior research suggested that users were very conscious of picture selection, and they used photos not only to visualize their looks, but also to emphasize qualities that were important for them (Ellison et al., 2006). Those content analyses of users' profiles found that people tend to choose the photos on their SNSs that make them look attractive (Siibak, 2010; Strano, 2008). Siibak (2010) further pointed out that men tend to depict their masculinity in their profile pictures. Those studies shed light on the role of photos in online self-presentation. However, they focused on the profile photos, which, according to Siibak (2010), were updated by the users monthly. Going beyond the profile pictures that previous research has focused on, the present study examines general, daily-updated pictures, such as snapshots and pictures of the users' interests, that they would like to share. By studying those frequently updated photographs, this study provides an insight of the motives of Chinese college students, a representative group of Chinese young social media users, in presenting themselves on SNSs with the guidance of the second research question:

RQ2: Why do Chinese college students construct their self-image on social networking sites through selective photo sharing? Is there any gender difference among them in conducting online self-presentation with images?

Methodology

To explore from a qualitative perspective how self-image is presented on SNSs, photo-elicitation was utilized as the primary method in answering the research questions. Photo-elicitation, a method of collecting data through discussion based on photographs (Harper, 1988), is appropriate in the current study to investigate the research questions focusing on Chinese college students' building and perceiving online self-presentation through photos posted on SNSs.

Participants

To find out potential differences in attitudes toward self-image on SNSs between males and females, and taking into consideration the potential effect bias gender could play when two groups confront each other, two focus groups—a female group and a male group—were separately used.

Serving as a great way to get input, feedback, and dialogue from participants (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998), the focus group method was applied as the group interview format in this study. It is also an appropriate way for researchers to interact with participants as moderators, to get rich data for developing deeper insight, and to answer the research questions in a multi-perspective way (Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Participants were also able to build on others' responses through interaction and come up with ideas they might not have acquired in one-on-one interviews (Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998; Suter, 2000).

The study participants were recruited from Chinese college students studying at a large private university in the U.S. through a snowball sampling technique (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2002) by making initial contact with the graduate and undergraduate students at the School of Communication. Group one consisted of five female participants: participant one was a graduate student majoring in public relations; participant two was an undergraduate majoring in accounting; participant three was a computer science student pursuing her doctorate; participants four and five were graduate students majoring in business administration and accounting respectively. Group two consisted of six male Chinese students: participant one was an undergraduate majoring in marine biology; participant two was a recent graduate working as a bank teller; participants three, four, and five were undergraduates majoring in engineering; participant six was an undergraduate majoring in business. The numerical code for each participant, by gender, is shown at the end of each comment (F1-5 = Female, M1-6 = Male).

Procedure

Two focus group sessions were conducted separately, but followed the same procedures. The study consisted of three parts in each session. After a brief self-introduction, the participants were shown, on a large screen, the first set of seven pictures which were chosen from the social networking sites of the two well-known Chinese "grassroots" celebrities, Furong Jiejie and Fengjie (See Figure 1). After being provided with time to peruse the pictures, the participants were asked several relevant questions such as: "Did you previously know of Furong Jiejie and Fengjie? If so, from what channels?"; "What kind of people do you think Furong and Fengjie are through these pictures?"; "Do you think these pictures accurately present their personalities?"; "What are their motives in posting these pictures?"; and "Do you regard such self-presentation as positive or negative?" Probing questions were further asked based on participants' answers.



Figure 1 Pictures shown in focus group session one: Fengjie, a.k.a. Sister Phoenix (upper) and Furong Jiejie, a.k.a. Sister Lotus (lower).

In part two, participants were shown a second set of pictures selected from the SNSs of two non-celebrity groups in China: “country nonmainstream,” known for their eccentric hair styles; and “flaunting wealth,” known for their excessively luxurious life styles (See Figure 2). Both of these self-presentation styles are highly controversial in China, and therefore, were selected for the focus group discussion. Guiding questions similar to those in session one were asked, as were accordingly probing questions.



Figure 2. Pictures shown in focus group session two: Country Nonmainstream (upper) and Flaunting Wealth (middle and lower).

In the third session, participants were asked to talk about the types of social media they regularly use and their motives for creating and maintaining these accounts. The moderator asked the participants' permissions to share their pictures on Renren, the most popular Chinese social networking site. Two participants in the female group and three in the male group volunteered to share their photos on Renren and discussed their motives of posting those photos. The other participants were encouraged, in a discussion based on several guiding questions, about their personal experiences such as, "What kind of pictures do you usually post on your own SNSs?"; "What kind of self-image do you want to present to the SNS audiences?"; and "Why do you post these pictures? Do you have any concerns before posting them?" Participants discussed their thoughts and overall attitudes toward SNSs as channels to construct self-images. Finally, the participants were debriefed on the study purposes and thanked for their participation. Each focus group session lasted about ninety minutes.

After thorough transcribing and thematic analysis based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researchers summarized the qualitative data and asked the participants to determine the accuracy of the analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Their agreement with the content in the summary suggests that the results from this research are transferable because they apply to others in similar situations (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 2006). Peer debriefing was used to further enhance the validity and reliability of the current research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the recruited participants majored in different subjects and came from different regions of China, which improves the representativeness of the findings.

Results

The current qualitative study explores Chinese students' perceptions and attitudes towards self-presentation on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). The discussions of two focus groups were transcribed and open coding was conducted to determine the common themes. Results from the focus group indicated that despite participants' common views toward social media use, gender differences do exist in terms of participants' perceptions of others' online self-presentations and motivations of social media use.

RQ1: How do Chinese college students studying abroad perceive others' personal images through the pictures and photos posted on social networking sites? Is there any gender difference among them in perceiving others' image-based self-presentation?

After being shown the first set of pictures of extreme self-presentations of some "grassroots" celebrities, participants shared common opinions regarding their motivations of sharing certain pictures including over-

confidence, narcissism, and desire for attention. According to Brunswik's Lens Model (1956), it can be inferred that the pictures for self-presentation on social media serve as cues for observers to make a personal judgment of the posters. However, since most of the observers may have little, if any, offline interaction with these "grassroots" celebrities, they have proportionally little chance to get to know them in a multi-faceted way. Thus, these pictures are the only sources for observers to make judgments and consequently, amplify the celebrities' desire for fame. In this case, the cue validity is violated. In addition, there is an interplay effect between social media and traditional media, as these so-called "grassroots" celebrities gaining fame on SNSs are also covered by the tabloid press and drawing further attention on social media. For instance, participant four in the female group pointed out that "those media that chose to cover stories of Furong Jiejie or Fengjie only have a short-term focus but fail to realize the long-term negative effect on social ideology" (F4). Driven by market demand (Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009), reporters tend to cover Furong Jiejie and Fengjie for sensational news (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001) regardless of the fact that young females may confuse sensationalism with real beauty and follow their examples by posting tantalizing pictures to gain fame.

Social Media as Double-Edged Sword

For the non-celebrities' online self-presentation, participants were exposed to two sets of pictures—"country non-mainstream," wearing bizarre dresses, and "wealth flaunters," posting pictures of luxury products or simply shopping bags with luxury brand names prominent in the photos. Unanimous opinions were drawn that the type of picture posted is based on the poster's personal choice, and social media users are entitled to present themselves online as they see fit. Participants one, two, and five in the male group shared the opinion that "individuals have their own lifestyle, so do they," and their willingness to share the joy of a newly purchased item should not be given much attention by others. As extreme or odd as some pictures may be, there is no right or wrong in terms of what kinds of pictures to post, and the choices are dependent on the user's education, value, and cultural background on an individual level. For instance, participant four, who had been living in the U.S. for five years, maintained that the "country non-mainstream" pictures, which look abnormal to Chinese students brought up in a group-oriented culture, would hardly be noticed in American society where such individuality is encouraged.

In further discussion, a common theme emerged proposing that social media functions as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it entitles ordinary people to the opportunity of voicing their dissent and allowing multiple opinions to be heard. In this regard, they are not only message receivers of traditional media, but also message senders and creators with social media.

On the other hand, without the gatekeepers in traditional media, the SNSs are littered with passive messages which exert a negative social influence (Wang, 2013), especially to less educated people and adolescents who do not yet possess a sound value system (Henley, 2010). Being influenced by such vain pictures, they may easily admire this seemingly luxurious lifestyle and pursue it in an inappropriate manner. For instance, in one tragic incident, a 17-year-old Chinese boy sold his kidney in exchange for an iPhone (Reuters, 2012). Participant five in the female group used a film entitled *Caught in the Web* as an example to stress the uncontrollable negative power of social media: “Such tragedy may be minimized, if not put to an end, by forming a healthier online environment on social networking sites” (F5).

Gender Differences in Perceiving Extreme Online Self-Presentation

Beyond shared opinions, the female participants expressed negative attitudes while the male participants held a more neutral to positive attitude towards the celebrities. As far as the female participants were concerned, the pictures posted on the SNSs emphasizing body images gave an impression of media hype and have a negative social impact. Some female participants felt “disgusted” when exposed to these pictures and held a completely negative attitude towards the images. On the contrary, being more tolerant towards such extreme self-presentation, most of the male participants stated that these pictures are no more than personal behaviors and exert little influence. Stating that “one man’s meat is another man’s poison,” male participants were convinced that such hype’s existence is possible, as these pictures are greeted with repulsion or welcomed by different groups of people simultaneously. One male participant even spoke highly of these celebrities’ confidence and courage as they refuse to yield to traditional values, and maintained that diversity should be welcomed.

Another participant in the male group shared a noteworthy view indicating the cultural differences between China and the United States:

I imagine neither Sister Lotus nor Sister Phoenix would be as popular in the United States as they are in China. Here in the United States, I have seen quite a few people behave in a more bizarre way. American people, when shown these pictures, may feel that they are nothing special (M4).

Participant two brought up a very good point from the perspective of cultural orientation differences between China and United States. These pictures used to elicit focus group discussion among Chinese students might not be of any significance in American society where individualism is valued and people are more self-oriented. However, in East Asian countries such as China where collectivistic cultures are stressed, people are

supposed to be group-oriented and take on uniform values (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this regard, those who do not conform to the mainstream would find it hard to be accepted by the public.

RQ2: Why do Chinese college students construct their self-image on social networking sites through selective photo sharing? Is there any gender difference among them in conducting online self-presentation with images?

To answer the second research question, a third session of the focus group was conducted with leading discussion questions such as what kind of SNSs the participants were using, what motivates them to use SNSs, and what kinds of pictures were usually selected to post online. Open coding of the transcripts identified that the most popular SNSs among the participants were Renren, Facebook, Weibo, Weixin, Twitter, and QQ Zone. While Renren was the most mentioned SNS for both groups of participants, the female group indicated using Weibo more frequently than the male group when posting images of self-presentation. All participants indicated that they used at least one form of the aforementioned SNSs on a daily basis.

In addition, two participants of each group volunteered to share the albums of their Renren pages with the rest of the group. Discussions were guided as to why such pictures were posted, and what aspects of themselves they wanted to show to their SNS audience. The participants who did not share the photos were asked whether similar or different types of pictures were posted on their SNS pages and what their motives were for sharing these pictures. The open coding of both groups' transcripts identified that while most motives confirmed existing literature, a unique theme was observed among the participants.

Motives of Using SNSs for Self-Presentation

Congruent with previous literature (Haferkamp et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2001; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012), the results show that when examining Chinese students' motives in using social media for self-presentation, emotional, cognitive, social, and habitual needs, there are four major motives. Among these motives, only habitual needs were indicated by both male and female participants of using SNSs to present themselves on a regular basis, while gender differences still existed in other motives (see Table 1 on the next page). For instance, emotional needs were emphasized by the female group, especially in posting and sharing photos. For example, one participant showed the pictures of her trips, home cooking, the success of an organized event, graduation, and studying late in the library. When asked why she posted these pictures, one participant explained, "All these are little but important pieces in my life. These pictures

recorded special moments that I would like to share with my friends and keep as a memory for myself” (F3).

Table 1

Motives for Using SNSs for Self-Presentation by Gender

Gender	Motives	Definition	Examples
Female/ male	Habitual needs	Post self-images on SNSs regularly, just like a habit	“I will feel uncomfortable if I post nothing today.” (M3)
	Peer pressure	Post photos of themselves because influenced by people around them	“All my friends and colleagues are posting pictures of themselves, and I feel left out if not doing so.” (F5)
Female	Emotional needs	Post self-images to provide oneself with pleasure or satisfaction	“These pictures recorded special moments that I would like to share with my friends and keep as a memory for myself.” (F1)
	Social needs	Post self-images to connect with friends through SNSs	“...when I post some pictures about myself, even a selfie, I could invariably get the “responses” from them and we briefly “chatted” on the SNS page.” (F2)
Male	Cognitive needs	Post pictures about oneself to inform his/her audience	“I also post pictures about interesting things happening here in the U.S.” (M2)

One picture showed a female participant with a group of friends in front of a stage. With this picture assisting her in recalling her memory, she shared the story behind it:

This is a special event I organized with my friends in which we put in a lot of effort. It was very successful and I posted this picture to share the joy of it with my friends, as well as to remember this very special moment in my life (F1).

As much as they were elaborated upon in the female group, emotional needs were rarely mentioned by the male group. In contrast, the male participants indicated cognitive needs as the highest motivation for their en-

agement in self-presentation on SNSs. For example, participant two mentioned that he mainly used SNSs as a news and information source: "I'm kept updated about what is going on in China by my friends through the pictures they post on Renren. I also post pictures about interesting things happening here in the U.S." (M2). The female group expressed more social needs than the male group in order to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances through presenting themselves on SNSs.

For instance, one participant shared her experience to support this point:

I have some old friends whom I do not contact frequently as we're all very busy with our schoolwork. However, when I post some pictures about myself, even a selfie, I invariably get "responses" from them and we briefly "chat" on the SNS page. I find it really cool! (F2)

Besides these four motives, an interesting theme was observed regarding the motives for engaging in SNSs: peer pressure. Several participants mentioned that they started using the SNS accounts simply because "their friends and colleagues were using it," and they "felt left out" when their friends were talking about the SNSs about which they didn't know much. Both male and female participants demonstrated peer pressure as a motivating factor for using SNSs for self-presentation. For example, participants in both groups expressed that the reason they started using Weibo was to find out "what's going on" through the photos their friends posted, just so they could keep up with the conversations of their friends and classmates.

Discussion

SNS as an Amplifier

A major theme that emerged from both focus groups is the amplifying role of SNSs in self-image representation. SNSs exhibit this amplifying effect on both the macro and micro levels. On the macro level, SNSs provide a platform where almost every individual in a society has the opportunity to express him/herself online. Participants unanimously agree that the kind of self-images chosen to represent individuals is a matter of personal choice influenced by education, cultural background, personal values, and individual cognitive levels. Thus, there is no right or wrong in such behaviors, even in the extreme examples shown in the first two parts of the photo elicitation. However, attention should be given to the social impact of such freedom. In a tightly controlled political system and a diminished individualist society such as China, SNSs help individuals to go beyond traditional norms and biased cultural values to represent a true self. Yet, on the other hand, unrestricted self-image presentation on SNSs could give rise to un-

healthy social values such as money worship and media hype, especially among teenagers. On the micro level, SNSs provide each individual the opportunity to break away from the restraints of interpersonal communication that may occur in their offline environments. Especially in China, where people are restrained to express themselves by being passive in traditional social settings (Kim et al., 2009), SNSs provide a mediated context to free intrapersonal restraints and amplify inner desires. In addition to the themes discussed above, the current study has the following theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

This present study advanced Brunswik's Lens Model (1956) to the online visual context from the perspectives of perceiving others and self-presentation. On the one hand, the results provided the understanding of cue utilization in the process of Chinese students making judgments of others. However, owing to social media's amplifying effect and uncontrollable power, cue validity was invariably violated in perceiving unacquainted online self-presenters since observers could easily make biased judgments with access to no more than several pictures of these presenters. Without offline interaction, interpersonal communication, and well-rounded photo presentation, observers are prone to regard what the posted photos show as the whole picture of the presenters, especially when observers seldom depend on all possible cues in making their judgments about others (Walther et al., 2008). On the other hand, in terms of self-presentation, the co-existence and interchangeability of self-directed and other-directed identity claims (Gosling et al., 2002) were found in the focus group results. According to the participants, some pictures taken at important moments such as a graduation ceremony or at an historical site during a trip were posted in order to commemorate those memorable moments and share these happy events with their friends simultaneously. For the controversial photos displaying the wearing of non-mainstream attire and showing off luxurious goods, it is believed that some posters may just present these photos to please themselves, serving as self-directed identity claims. However, due to the high reachability of social media and people's unawareness of media power, such self-directed photos eventually were perceived as other-directed self-presentation and aroused unexpectedly negative reaction.

In addition, this study went beyond the computer-mediated communication research of profile pictures conducted by previous studies (Hancock, 2009; Hum, 2011; Siibak, 2010; Strano, 2008) and analyzed self-presentation through photos in a more multi-faceted and comprehensive fashion. The methodological innovation should also be noted as the majority of previous research of self-presentation was conducted in a quantitative

way, and qualitative methods such as photo elicitations and focus groups were seldom applied which enabled the researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of specific circumstances and research questions (Berg, 2009; Creswell, 2006). This methodology was appropriate given the research questions of this study.

Furthermore, in examining motives for using SNSs, an interesting theme observed among study participants was that of peer pressure, which had not been identified in previous literature. While this motive might be overlapping with the concept of social needs, we believe it should be separately studied as an independent source of motivation. Social needs are “related to strengthening contact with family, friends, and the world” (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973, p. 167), the application of which is in the online setting. However, the peer pressure observed in the current study bridges the offline and online settings by carrying the offline social needs to the online scenario. The effects of peer pressure were also discovered in photo sharing, where certain types of pictures were considered desirable among the participants’ social groups.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study also provide valuable practical implications about the entertainment industry to assist celebrities, distributors of mass-communicated images, and the public to be more aware of the power of SNSs in presenting self-images. Distinct from the meticulous gatekeepers of China’s government-owned traditional media, social media endow users with unprecedented rights, the freedom of self-presentation, and allow everyone the opportunity to be a message creator. On the other hand, social media also enable celebrities to engage excessively in self-sensationalism, which invariably exerts negative influence on themselves and society. The awareness of the double-edged-sword effect of social media and online self-presentation will help minimize, if not terminate undesired negative effects.

Another practical meaning uncovered in the study is the potential benefits of SNSs for the practice of personal public relations, or personal branding. For individuals who are starting up their career or trying to build their expertise and reputation in a certain field, SNSs provide a perfect opportunity as “owned media” for users to build and present their own images. Unlike celebrities, common people do not have the resources or financial capability to hire professional publicists to help build their public images, either through traditional advertising (paid media) or public relations (earned media). The low maintenance and low cost of SNSs offer channels of information dissemination and self-image presentation for individuals and small businesses. Nevertheless, the impact of SNSs could be rather large.

Limitations and Further Research

Despite our pioneering efforts, the limitation of the convenience sample used in this study should be noted when making generalizations. This study also focused on a distinct group of social media users from China. Future research could explore cultural differences of self-presentation and perception of others through pictures posted on SNSs by conducting focus groups with American users shown the same sets of pictures. Data could be analyzed through comparing and contrasting approaches. In addition, the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their age, education, family background, and social economic status hinders the diversity and comprehensiveness of the data collected. Future research is encouraged to invite participants of more diverse demographic characteristics.

Conclusion

This research examined how Chinese college students studying abroad perceived extreme online self-presentation and how they present themselves online. Gender difference in online self-presentation was also discussed. This study found that while people's attitudes towards online self-presentation and their motives for using the social media and self-presentation differ between two gender groups, there are common patterns as well. Females provide mostly negative comments on extreme self-presentation, while males tend to show understanding and tolerance of those behaviors, acknowledging that those are personal choices. Both females and males are aware that social media serve as a double-edged sword, which could build up one's fame and ruin his or her reputation all at once. Therefore, they all noted that we should use it carefully in presenting ourselves.

The motives for using social media and self-presentation also differed by gender. Women maintain a hedonistic use of the social media, concentrating on entertainment and sharing with friends, while men focus on information seeking. However, both male and female groups indicated peer pressure as a factor impacting their decision to use SNSs. China has the largest population of Internet users, and social media are becoming the most popular online communication venues (Chu & Choi, 2010). By examining the motives of social media use and self-presentation online, this research contributes to the knowledge of the Chinese people's attitudes towards social media and their online behaviors.

In addition, by examining people's perceptions of others' self-presentations, this research demonstrated both theoretical and practical significance. On the one hand, the findings advanced Brunswik's Lens Model (1956) to the online visual context from the perspectives of perceiving others and self-presentation. Also, this research focused specifically on self-

presentation through images, which enhanced prior research on textual context and profile photos (Hancock, 2009; Hum, 2011; Siibak, 2010; Strano, 2008). On the other hand, this study provides valuable implications for companies or individuals such as celebrities, who tend to use social media to promote brands or their own reputations. Since social media are acknowledged as a double-edged sword, they should take advantage of social media for self-presentation and be cautious of the potential negative effects in the meantime.

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