IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ONLINE: A STUDY OF THE CHINESE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE RENREN

I. INTRODUCTION

There is widespread consensus that SNSs are an effective means of communicating identity and exploring impression management\(^1\). Researchers have analyzed SNSs in terms of their use as Foucaultian ‘technologies of the Self’\(^2\), able to facilitate the construction and performance of personal identity. Marder et al.\(^3\) argue that Facebook offers users a wide variety of tools through which to communicate their identity: the personal profile represents users’ main means for presenting themselves to the online community\(^4\), where “individuals must write themselves into being [to] express and represent salient aspects of their identity”\(^5\). It is a personal web space for descriptions about the self\(^6\) that includes various elements: from personal information as gender, hometown, political views to favorite music, books and quotations\(^7\). The profile construction requires constant effort: the process of combining an homepage can be compared to the formation of an online identity; once assembled, the profile “reveals details about [the user] as if shedding light on [his] personality”\(^8\).

As the users’ identities are revealed, they manage their image more carefully, by not disclosing undesirable aspects of their self\(^9\): they tend to create “hoped-for possible selves”, socially desirable selves, difficult to achieve offline. Boon and Sinclair\(^10\)

---

\(^*\) Master’s Degree in Media management and cultural event planning at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Email: serena.fossati@hotmail.it.


\(^3\) B. Marder et al., *Every Post You Make, Every Pic you Take. I’ll Be Watching You: Behind Social Spheres on Facebook*, 45\(^{th}\) Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences: 2012, 859-868.


\(^7\) A. Smock, *Self-Presentation on Facebook: Managing Content Created by the User and Others*, Conference Papers-International Communication Association, Singapore 2010.


demonstrated that users are more concerned in conveying an attractive and profitable vision of themselves online, in line with how they want to be perceived. Gonzales et al. similarly found that users often tend to present themselves in order to please others, seeking positive impressions and developing a favorable self-image. They also tend to hide or avoid information that may cause negative responses. Ellison et al. concluded that individuals present idealized versions of themselves online, framing them as ‘profiles as promise’.

However, overall research analyzing users’ identity construction online suggests that the nature of SNSs encourages individuals to construct profiles that reflect their offline self. Users’ construction of their self online is deeply connected to the offline social dimension and influenced by their offline social identities; the merging of offline and online worlds requires the self to be presented authentically. There is significant evidence that users use SNSs mainly to communicate, maintain and enhance relationships with already existing offline social networks. Larsen, in her study on the Danish SNS Arto, concluded that SNS can be considered as a continuation of users’ real lives. As a consequence, they tend to be honest by projecting their real self online. Users can construct their identity through the photo gallery, their profile descriptions and those from friends. Therefore, friends play a significant role since their comments not only contribute to support friendships, but also to construct the users’ identity. Mcmillan and Morrison argued that college students join SNS to reinforce and extend their real offline identities and communities, e.g. by using internet to plan events with their offline friends. Stokes concluded that SNSs anchor users’ identities and connections to real, embodied selves and offline networks and make it possible for individuals to manage their self-presentation and social networks in ways that offline social spaces often do not permit.

Researchers have shown that individual cultural identity can affect self-presentation and communicative behaviors within SNSs. Cho found that users of Korean SNSs tend to exhibit lesser but more personal self-disclosure and use more non verbal com-

---

16 A. Smith, Why Americans Use Social Media, Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011.
munication means, while those of American SNSs exhibit more frequent self-disclosure and rely on direct text-based communication. Rosen et. al\textsuperscript{22} showed that SNS users with individualistic cultural identities share more personal digital photos, while users from collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize group harmony. Zhao and Jiang\textsuperscript{23} found that individuals of more conservative cultures visually present themselves through neutral pictures, while those of less conservative cultures are more likely to share less discrete images. Jackson et al.\textsuperscript{24} concluded that in collectivistic cultures the importance of family, friends and groups may be responsible for Chinese users’ lesser use of SNSs, while in individualistic cultures the importance of the individual and having more but less close friendships may be partly responsible for US users’ greater use of SNSs. Most studies on cross-cultural impact on online activities are based on Hofstede’s\textsuperscript{25} culture dimensions (power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance). His model is one of the most frequently used conceptual and empirical frameworks in cross-cultural communication research and therefore can be applied to the present study.

2. FOCUS ON THE PRESENT STUDY

The current study investigates identity construction strategies implemented by Chinese users on the Chinese SNS Renren 人人网. Created in 2005, it was initially named Xiaonei 校内网 (on campus), mainly addressed to Chinese students for intra-campus socializing. In 2006 it was acquired by the Oak Pacific Interactive that expanded the network and turned it into Renren in 2009, with a broader target audience. Renren has grown exponentially since its inception: the SNS has grown approximately 210 million activated users in March 2014\textsuperscript{26}. Renren has developed an efficient platform for users to share their daily lives through functions and applications as photo and video sharing, blogging, social gaming, interest groups and like pages. Renren affordances will be illustrated in the section dedicated to the homepages analysis.

Based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory that provides a framework to assess differences between cultures, the study examines whether the Chinese culture influences Renren users’ self-presentation. I accomplish this by focusing on the analysis of users’ personal homepages (in particular the VIP profile and notes function), discourses and common practices (particularly photosharing, tagging and the feedback mechanism of commenting).

The study is based on a sample of 28 users (14 males, 14 females), between the ages of 18 and 25, living in large cities in China. Recruitment took place via posting a call for participants on my homepage, asking friends to repost the information on other people’s walls. The participants come from different educational and professional backgrounds (high school students, undergraduates and graduates) and have varied levels of engagement with Renren. The paper is based on a qualitative and ethnographical investigation that combines non-participant and 3-month participant observation and

\textsuperscript{22} D. Rosen et al., *Online and Offline Social Networks: Investigating Culturally-Specific Behavior and Satisfaction*, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Hawai International Conference on System Sciences, New Brunswick 2010.

\textsuperscript{23} C. Zhao, G. Jiang, *Cultural Differences on Visual Self Presentation through Social Networking Site Profile Images*, CHI 2011, 1129-1132.


\textsuperscript{26} http://ir.renren-inc.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=244796&p=irol-homeProfile.
semi-structured interviews. Non-participant observation, aimed at acquiring a greater understanding of the field setting, consisted in the passive content analysis of users’ profiles. A more active engagement consisted in posting contents on my wall and directly interacting with users by commenting their posts, photos, videos. Interviews enabled to collect rich data and more fully understand the phenomenon under consideration. Participants were asked to describe in depth their use of SNS in relation to the construction of their self online, to evaluate the importance they ascribe to different Renren affordances and to the sharing of specific information on their profile. Semi-structured interviews enabled to remain open to unexpected outcomes and to ask further questions that could contribute to the study.

3. RESULTS

1. Personal homepages analysis

Results have been interpreted by interrelating Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance (UA) with individualism-collectivism (I-C) variables, in order to define categories of users.

1.1. VIP profile

The homepages do not have the same structure: users, by performing activities such as regularly logging to their profile, sharing contents or receiving feedback from their friends, can earn ‘points’. The collect of points makes the level of the homepage increase and allows users to get extra privileges, as the access to additional features. Only those who have a VIP profile can enjoy these privileges: this form of hierarchy may lead to a competition among friends, aimed at achieving higher VIP levels. These users are defined as follower users, a category obtained by interrelating high UA and C variables. They compete not to benefit of VIP privileges but to exceed their friends’ level. This competition can exert pressure on users and influence their behavior: some of them are also disposed to get VIP privileges by paying a monthly fee, because of the fear to be excluded from their peer group, not to be fully accepted by their friends. They are sensitive to their friends’ judgment, seeking their approval and inclined to follow their model. The VIP plate, next to the user’s name, becomes a symbol that exhibits his status symbol and social power. This competition also leads to the leveling and standardization of the homepages.

I started accumulate points to become a VIP like all my friends, I wasn’t interested in customize my homepage […]. Some of my friends even bought VIP profiles from Taobao to achieve their friends levels […] they paid money not to be isolated from others (M, 20, college student).

Original users, a category emerged from the interrelation of low UA and I variables, are willing to stand out from the countless users who inhabit the most crowded Chinese SNS, stating their unique personality. The achievement of higher levels of VIP profile is aimed at gaining additional tools to customize the profile with more personal features, that reflect traits of their personality. The VIP profile represents an outstanding opportunity to differentiate themselves from others, to express their uniqueness and not to remain bland and anonymous. For example, a user set a French song as background
music and the lines of a French poetry in the background: these elements reflect his deep interest in the French language and culture, that are also object of his university studies. He considers the VIP profile as a tool to narrate his audience about himself and does not make an exhibitionist use of it, in terms of search of visibility.

*With VIP privileges I can customize my homepage as I wish to make it my own, with elements that express my personality [...] this is a way to express myself, showing what I like, the music I listen. I don’t want my homepage to be anonymous, I want that it says something real about me* (M, 24, college student).

### 1.2. Notes function

The notes function is a writing application that represents a significant relational space, as it promotes interaction, discussion and engagement among users. A deep difference between the contents posted by female users and those shared by males has emerged.

Girls are defined as *emotional users*, a category obtained by interrelating low UA and I variables. They consider this space as a privileged communication channel, that allows them to freely express their inner thoughts and deepest feelings, pouring out their concerns, melancholy, joy connected to their personal experiences, e.g. the end of a love story, the move to foreign cities, the end of college, exciting travels. They express themselves sincerely without the fear of being judged, seek connection and support of their relational networks. This self-disclosure contributes to strengthen the social ties and the cohesion of the group.

*It’s a way to share my thoughts, my happiness, my fears, my melancholy with my friends. When something upsets me, I start writing and all emotions come out [...]. Sharing my feelings can make me feel better because I know that I’m not alone and my friends care about me. With their comments they support me, give me suggestions, share same experiences* (F, 24, college student).

However, the girls who find the courage to open up and share personal aspects of their self tend to protect themselves, by making use of an implicit and cautious communication, typical of the *high context cultures* 27. They often resort to songs and poetries to indirectly refer to their experiences.

* [...] I prefer do this by sharing a song because the text of the song can “tell” exactly what I feel deep inside. The words of a song can really express the emotions I’m feeling [...] so I don’t have anything to add to these words* (F, 19, college student).

Males are defined as *carefree users*, a category emerged from the interrelation of high UA and C variables. They tend not to tell about intimate aspects of their self, but prefer dealing with lighter topics, often related to their personal interests and hobbies. They face a wide range of topics: from the tricks to be successful in online games, to scientific quiz, from debates about sports events, to pros and cons of technological devices. They consider this section as a way to seek participation and connection with their friends, to keep cultivating relationships.

---

1.3. Discourses

What, where, and how we should talk is regulated by cultures: culture manifests in the communication behaviors of individuals, determining what is appropriate in exchanges.

Risk takers, a category obtained by interrelating low UA and I variables, not only consider Renren as a space for social interaction, but also for participation and debate that allows them to convey information in alternative to the official information channels, to freely express their opinions and have their voices heard on topics ranging from economics to politics and society. They are also likely to deal with sensitive issues, trying to bypass the controls introduced by the Chinese authorities to monitor contents online. These users tend to create alternative homophonic expressions to indirectly refer to sensitive issues, successfully circumventing the Intrusion Detection System devices, that work by inspecting web traffic to determine if specific sensitive keywords are present.

Social network gives me the opportunity to share my opinions about political, economic news although there is a political control of the online expression [...]. But I do it indirectly, I refer to these facts without make it explicit or by using different words, homophones (M, 25, graduate).

For example, a user posted a message referring to the “228 Incident”, with the purpose of opening what he calls a “window of knowledge” for the younger generations who do not know what happened in Taiwan in 1947, and willing to express his opinion about it. The majority of users can be defined as wary users, a category attained by interrelating high UA and C variables, who are aware that Renren, being an open and not intimate platform, exposes them to their friends’ judgment and to the risk of a possible loss of “face”. In the Chinese culture, the concept of face refers to the reputation and social status of a person and is associated to values as dignity, trust, respect that a person benefits within his community. They are aware that their actions online have consequences in the real life and therefore prefer avoiding to share inappropriate contents, safeguarding the harmony of their relational network. They talk about topics they are interested in, that arouse their curiosity or tell about their experiences. They rarely tend to discuss about political, economic or social issues, except for news that upset the common sensibility, e.g. the destructive effects of the Indian monsoons, or more curious news, e.g. the case of a German man who tried to join Xian terracotta army. The most debated topic relates to travel, as the majority of users are college students who have decided to travel to Western countries. In their profiles they tell their friends about the places they visited, the emotions they felt, the people they met or friends they reconnected to, the freedom they experienced. Traveling exposes them to different cultures and lifestyles: this contributes opening up their visions and minds, questioning their beliefs, experiencing the new and leaving an impact on their identities.

Travel means freedom to me: see the world, learn about people, explore new places and cultures [...] travel changed my attitude towards the world, the way I see the world (F, 25, graduate).

The posts also relate to the users’ personal interests: they express their enthusiasm for team sports as soccer and basketball, their admiration for sport stars considered as real heroes and discuss about technological devices, sharing excited posts about the release of Apple new products on the Chinese market. These topics enable users to trigger heated debates and lively conversations, promoting dialogue and discussion.

3. PRACTICES

1. Photosharing and tagging

Photosharing is a significant research context to investigate the processes of impression management and self-presentation on SNSs\(^{30}\). It is the most popular practice among users, who organize their photos into theme albums and also incorporate images in their updates, to increase the emotional impact of their thoughts.

*Individual-oriented users*, a category attained by interrelating low UA and I variables, are storytellers who narrate their daily lives through a visual narration, able to emotionally involve their friends. The pictures are focused on the individual, on his sporting and cultural activities, travels and experiences, leaving the social dimension into background. They are more likely to customize their pictures through image editors available online that allow them to add more personal elements, both textual and graphical, that express different traits of their identity. A smile may convey a cheerful and playful personality, an heart emphasizes a more sentimental character. They are also willing to post photos in order to promote their works, e.g. a user posted a series of paintings to promote his creative and artistic works.

*I use Renren to provide details of my work and publish pictures of my paintings online to promote myself. Someone could see them and maybe contact me to do new paintings or to buy them* (M, 25, graduate)

*Group-oriented users*, a category emerged from the interrelation of high UA and C variables, prefer sharing group photos, while socializing offline with their friends. The focus is on the user’s social identity as these pictures exhibit his offline relationships and show his connections, also through the tagging function. Photosharing enables users to cultivate offline well established relationships even in a virtual environment and to seek a further connection with friends. Therefore, these presentations of the self are managed in relation to the users’ offline identities.

*I post pictures of me and my friends having fun together because I can talk to them about what we do together even online. I mean if I play a football match with my friends I like to post the pictures of that match on Renren and talk about who played well or not, have a laugh together. It’s fun! Posting pictures of me [...] as many do is so boring, I think people don’t care if I eat, study [...] It would be also a bit narcissist* (M, 22, college student).

These users are also willing to develop conversations around pictures, involving their friends, who represent an active and collaborative resource, contributing to the con-

struction of a shared narration. When users are tagged in a picture by a friend, they immediately become part of a conversation that involves friends and even strangers. For example, a user, after being tagged in the pictures of his theatre performance, has found himself immersed in a conversation with his friend’s friends who were in the audience. This has had consequences on his real life:

*a week ago a friend tagged me in our show pictures and her friends started commenting on them. I was happy to be in the conversation with them and talk about what they liked or not of our show although I didn’t know them [...] it increases engagement with my friends and this evening I’m gonna meet them too* (M, 24, college student).

2. Feedback mechanism: commenting

Users are willing to interact with their friends; sharing posts is an opportunity to stimulate debates and exchanges of ideas and opinions: comments are appreciated and encouraged.

*Anti social users*, a category attained by interrelating low UA and I variables, are inclined to post critical and aggressive comments on their friends’ updates, reducing significantly the quality of the interactions. They do not want to be ignored: they want to draw attention on themselves, even by putting friends in a bad light and neglecting any prospect of reciprocity. This type of user is absent in the current study: users do not share anti-social comments in order to safeguard the harmony and cohesion of the group, since aggressive comments might cause tensions among users and end up in personal conflicts. In a collectivistic culture, where group harmony is strongly emphasized, the direct conflict between people is considered inappropriate: this makes critical comments difficult to express.

*Social users*, a category obtained by interrelating high UA and C variables, tend to appreciate the feedback mechanism of commenting, as it allows them to express their appreciation in a deeper and more personal way, on the contrary of the ‘I like’ function, that is a simple and little of substance communication channel. They consider comments as an effective tool to promote interactivity and participation among friends.

*I like when friends comment on my pictures. It’s nice to see that somebody’s been looking at them and that they want to know where I’ve been, what I’ve seen, who are people in the pictures [...] We always start long conversation [...] I really like it because it means that they care about me!* (F, 20, college student).

Their comments often have a sarcastic nature: the playful irony is essential in socializing with friends, since it helps to promote the solidarity within the group and to strengthen its internal cohesion through the indirect expression of their mutual affection.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results show that the users’ identity is largely influenced by the traditional values of the Chinese culture, but also conditioned by Western modern lifestyles. The results will
be compared to those of a qualitative study conducted by the Observatory New Media on Università Milano-Bicocca undergraduate students’ use of Facebook\textsuperscript{31}.

Firstly, the identity construction of users is both social and individual oriented: Lu\textsuperscript{32} suggests the Chinese Bicultural Self model to describe the modern Chinese identity. Collectivism is deeply rooted in the traditional concept of the Self: Confucian tradition strongly emphasizes the priority of the collective unit and its well-being, of the person as relational being. Individualism, that emphasizes personal talents and needs, is mainly the result of the modernization processes undertaken by the Chinese government and of the modern influences from Western countries: China is indeed characterized by an undergoing transition towards a market system and by a changing society, influenced by Western ideologies and lifestyles. This duality is evident in the homepages design: original users invest time and energies in customizing their profiles, with the purpose of expressing traits of their unique personality. The VIP privileges enable them to differ from others and to stand out from the crowd of users with a standard homepage. Follower users, on the contrary, aim to get a VIP profile to achieve their peers’ level and to be accepted in their group. They prefer conforming to their friends’ model, by opting for a leveled profile. This duality is also noticeable in photosharing: individual-oriented users are more likely to share pictures about their daily life, focusing the narration on themselves, leaving little space to the social dimension. They also consider Renren as a platform where to promote themselves, their individual talents and skills. Group-oriented users, on the contrary, prefer sharing group photos with their offline friends, who play an active role as they contribute to the dynamic construction of a common narration. The focus is no longer on the individual but on his social identity and connections. Italian students tend to distance themselves from an exhibitionist use of the SNS, perceiving those who heavily use Facebook as narcissist\textsuperscript{33}, in need for attention and self-promotion. They prefer avoiding to share the details of their daily lives through photos and updates. They appear more interested in using the SNS to communicate with their closest friends, with whom they have strong ties in the offline world, i.e. to organize meetings.

Secondly, Chinese society is considered as masculine, success oriented and driven. However, Renren is a platform that allows girls for new opportunities to reveal themselves, to get in the game with their ideas, thoughts and feelings. The notes function allows them to freely express themselves, that would be unusual offline in everyday life: this implies the willingness of women to make their voices heard, often unheard because of the discrimination towards the female gender that makes the role and participation of women within society still limited. Online, they find the courage to communicate sincerely their inner thoughts without any fear, seeking support of their relational network. This self-disclosure promotes solidarity among girls, who support each other, by sharing messages full of advice and moral support. On the contrary, Italian students tend to condemn those who over-self expose by sharing personal matters: self-disclosing online is widely criticized and associated with forms of exhibitionism and narcissism. They prefer more reserved spaces to talk about their personal lives. Most students do not want to share intimate matters because of the fear of losing control of their privacy.

\textsuperscript{31} N. Cavalli et al., Facebook Influence on University Students’ Media Habits: Qualitative Results from a Field Research, MIT 7-Media in Transition, 2011.


Therefore, they are cautious in their content-sharing, to avoid unpleasant consequences, and prefer updating trivial and superficial contents. Mainardi et al. study on gender differences in online consumption and content production among Italian undergraduates concluded that female students tend to adopt styles with the lowest level of engagement in online content production and sharing. They tend to be less active in online platforms than males: their online activities seem fewer and rarely conducted.

Thirdly, from the analysis of comments it clearly emerges that users place more value on the group interests. According to Confucian tradition, social harmony and order are a priority: they are attained by respecting each social role and responsibility. Within Confucian societies systems of rituals and moral precepts establish how individuals should behave properly within social relationships. In the current study, users always express positive comments on their friends’ posts, since adverse comments might create tensions and lead to potential conflicts. The social orientation of individuals makes them aware of acting in front of their friends and that their actions have consequences even offline. Therefore, they avoid to get their friends embarrassed, risking to make them lose their face, reputation and respect, by posting critical comments. Users mutually cooperate to protect each other face: this leads them to assume a strong sense of social responsibility towards their friends, preserving the group harmony.

Finally, discourse analysis has brought to light a duality. On one hand, wary users adhere to the rules that expressly prohibit to deal with sensitive issues in online environments. They are aware of the consequences that breaking these rules would imply and tend to be careful about the contents they share. They prefer to deal with lighter issues, often related to their personal experiences and interests. On the other hand, risk takers expose themselves with the purpose of freely expressing their ideas, conveying information as an alternative to official information channels, giving rise to debates on a wide variety of issues. To achieve their goal, they are also willing to create new expressions to successfully circumvent the controls of authorities. Renren represents a real place of escape and a platform for self-expression. On the contrary, Italian students tend not to participate much in the SNS: they seem less interested in producing contents and prefer acting as “spectators”. They tend to be moderate in terms of content published: the SNS is perceived as a tool for entertainment, evasion and distraction from real life and not a platform where to have deep conversations. They prefer sharing “nonsense, silly and not relevant” contents. Only few students show a tendency to deal with more serious content, i.e. cultural, political or informative issues.

The conception of the Chinese identity is constantly evolving by virtue of social, economic and political changes, and of foreign influences: these factors lead to a renegotiation of the traditional values, paving the way for a new image of the Chinese Self. The users involved in this study are born between the end of the 1980s and the early ’90s: it is the first generation after the introduction of the one-child policy and who enjoyed the first positive results of the economic development. They come from relatively well-off families, have the opportunity to receive an higher education, to travel and study abroad, to have access to new media: this may deeply influence their identity construction. They are defined as “extensive travelers”, “unique arts expresser”35 and

---

“freedom seekers”36. The current research study reveals the paradigm of a plural, changing and complex Self, that is the result of a narration created and assembled by a large number of individuals who do not merely play the role of “readers”, but are active “co-authors” of the user’s narration.

SUMMARY

Social networking sites (SNS) are online platforms that enable individuals new opportunities for the management of personal relationships and the construction of their Self online. Cultural identity can exert an influence on self-presentation and communicative behaviors within SNSs. The current study investigates identity construction processes on the Chinese SNS Renren. Based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the study examines whether the features of the Chinese culture affect the users’ self-presentation. The paper is based on a qualitative and ethnographical investigation of 28 Renren users, between the ages of 18 and 25, living in large cities in China. My findings indicate that the identities produced in this online environment are sensitive to the national culture. The research study reveals the paradigm of a complex, plural and changing Self, deeply influenced by the traditional values of the Chinese culture but also conditioned by Western ideologies and lifestyles, as a result of the recent modernization of the country. These elements lead to a renegotiation of the traditional values, paving the way to a new conception of the Chinese Self.