Comparing the use of space in selfies on Chinese Weibo and Twitter

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Abstract
Selfies are a ubiquitous practice worldwide in which social media users create and share cultural artifacts that go beyond mere idealized or narcissistic self-presentations. As a cultural phenomenon, selfies reflect not just personal impressions but also communal values of modern life. This study analyzes the use of place in selfies as a defining visual element of self-representation in the United States and China. In particular, this research examines differences and commonalities in the places used to create meaning in selfies in the two national contexts. Our research shows that the deliberate use of places plays a critical role in the presentation of self within selfies both in the United States and China. While there are significant differences in some aspects of selfie construction, the selection of places for selfies followed similar patterns of public and private spaces in both countries, privileging the domestic and commercial most of all, and providing some support for the dominance of a global online culture over the influence of a specific national culture in presentations of the self.

Keywords
Cross-cultural communication, self-representation, public and private spaces, space and place in selfies, Twitter, Weibo, social media

Introduction
Selfies—self-portraits generally taken at arm’s length using a mobile device and shared on social media—are a common practice worldwide. The pervasive use of selfies from presidents to astronauts and teenagers led Oxford Dictionaries to name “selfie” the word of the year in 2013 (Oxford Dictionaries,

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Global Media and China 2(2) 2013) and has made selfies an increasing subject of academic inquiry, as researchers explore the implications for self-representation in a variety of contexts and methodological frameworks. Research on selfies has examined the representation of gender and race (see, for example, Albury, 2015), as well as the use of selfies to make political statements (see, for example, Baishya, 2015; Deller & Tilton, 2015), and different styles of selfies regarding facial expressions and other elements.

Selfies reflect social communication cues and values through the elements used to perform and represent the self in the frame. The elements of that self-representation may include such things as facial expression, fashion choices, and the incorporation of elements in the frame other than the photographic subject. The spaces in which individuals take a selfie also contribute to the identity representation and comprehension of the image. The selection of space, we argue, contributes to the representation of an idealized self in selfies by utilizing the shared sociocultural meanings that are associated with specific place identities (see Rooney et al., 2010). At the same time, selfies can be understood as an attempt to give meaning to a specific space by associating an individual with that space, hence turning it into a meaningful and possibly private place (see Cresswell, 2004), which in turn assists the construction of a person’s self-representation. In that respect, a selfie uses space for the construction of self but also to create personal places by giving meaning to spaces, which are often seen as not static (Thrift, 2006). “The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” (Massey, 1994, p. 5) and are seen as “porous.”

Thus, we suggest that meanings of places within a selfie can fluctuate as they are often dominated by social conventions, especially across different geographical boundaries and within varied sociocultural settings or simply between the encoder (the photographer/subject) and decoder (the consumer/reader; Hall, 1980) or observer of places (O’Toole & Were, 2008) in a selfie. We contend that these places are important factors in the visual representation of the self, in particular when selfies are used as a communicative device (Frosh, 2015; Meese et al., 2015; van Dijck, 2008) and shared online, just as O’Toole and Were (2008) argued that “places are ostensibly constructed and possessed for an operational purpose, but also create and communicate meaning” (p. 618).

The use of selfies in different national and cultural contexts allows for the comparison of cultural meanings and practices as the use of selfies in social media is a global phenomenon. This study is interested in the use of physical spaces and meaningful places or place identities, to represent oneself in selfies, as “[p]lace may matter more than ever, even in the globalized world, as a marker and shaper of identity” (Larson & Pearson, 2012, p. 242). The choice to take a selfie in a particular setting demonstrates the importance of a place within a specific physical space, whether a private, domestic scene, or public site, and can be read to reflect the social and cultural values of a person taking a selfie. This research therefore examines the use of place in selfies, comparing selfies shared on the US-based site Twitter with those shared on the predominantly Chinese site Weibo. Although we do not contend that specific visual cultural identities are used in a single country, the diverse political, economic, and social factors that influence social media use in these countries allow an examination of distinct contexts.

**Literature review**

**Selfies and presentation of self on social media sites**

Selfies may be considered a visual genre (Meese et al., 2015), structured by certain conventions, namely, “the conflation of photographer and subject, a framing in which the subject dominates the foreground of the image, a subject typically looking directly into the lens, and a perspective that is
generally front-view from above” (pp. 1820-1821). This conflation of “photographer and subject” highlights the notion of a twice-enforced construction of a single reality, while also empowering the subject as active participant in the reality construction. As traditionally separate roles of photographer and subject merge into a single entity, the individual controls not simply the actions of the photographer but also the actions of the subject to often create and present an idealized self (Drenten, 2012; Goffman, 1959). As Rettberg (2014) notes, “Creating and sharing a selfie is an act of self-representation” that “also exists in a social context, once shared” (p. 12). Likewise, van Dijck (2008) argues that the digital photo is a form of communication rather than a mere representation of the self. Indeed, the genre of the selfie, as “ephemeral, quickly circulated, discarded, and forgotten” (Hess, 2015, p. 1631) images that invoke comments or likes on social media platforms, may be seen as more fluid forms of visual communication representing changing yet constructed selves in various socio-spatial contexts.

The selfie is a specifically self-conscious form of self-portrayal—the inclusion of the outstretched arm or at times the selfie stick in the image is a convention of the form, and serves to announce that the photographer has chosen to represent and share the image of themselves. As Frosh (2015) puts it, “[a selfie] makes visible its own construction as an act and a product of mediation” (p. 1621)—Losh (2015) calls this “transparent mediation” (p. 1654). Baishya (2015) notes that these “transparent” markers of mediation, which are defined by the absence of professional photographic conventions, highlight the authenticity or realism of selfies. The amateurish look of selfies “becomes an index of the real … Amateur, therefore, becomes synonymous with the everyday and the evidentiary in the case of the selfie, and an embedded presence in time and space accompanies selfie imagery” (pp. 1688-1689).

Critics call selfies “an out-of-control form of vanity and narcissism in a society in which an unchecked capitalism promotes forms of rampant self-interest that both legitimises selfishness and corrodes individual and moral character” (Giroux, 2015, p. 4). Others, such as Murray (2015), instead argue that selfies can eventually undermine the negative implications of such narcissistic presentations of self because “popular forms of female self-imaging may offer the opportunity for political engagement, radical forms of community building—and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation” (p. 491). Boon and Pentney’s (2015) study of breastfeeding selfies and the performance of motherhood is an example of this. Selfies then become communication devices that simultaneously establish and challenge socially constructed identities or representations.

Gomez-Cruz and Thornham (2015) caution that “If we only understand selfies as self-representation or the output of intentional authoring, we not only flatten out these relations, we also somewhat negate them by offering a causal trajectory between user and image” (p. 7) and argue for an approach to studying selfies that views the taking of a selfie as an “embodied and re-articulated sociotechnical act” (p. 7) that takes place within a cultural context. Indeed, selfies may go beyond the notion of self-representation and can display social relationships or “acknowledge a friendship” (Miller & Sinana, 2017, p. 28). As such, the elements and the space within a selfie image, that is, the context may be significant in understanding selfies and their functionality. This study is specifically interested in the use of places in selfies, in the hopes of improving our understanding of one aspect of the complex social, cultural, and technological context within which selfies are created.

**Self-representation within spaces and places**

Researchers point out that the concepts of space and place are dissimilar, even though the terms are interdependent for definition of each (Tuan, 1977). While space is seen as a geographic.
location, place reflects the special and shared meanings given to a particular space. Tuan (1977) speaks of “locational qualities” that distinguish the two concepts: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (p. 6). Using a particular space within a selfie turns this space into a place as part of the visual presentation of the self.

Space and place are increasingly seen as important factors in communication. Adams and Jansson (2012) speak of a “spatial turn” in communication, as contemporary developments of interactivity, technological convergence and mediated mobility highlight an increased connection between “social power and power of place” (p. 301). Digital media technologies allow for an increased “material and representational production of space” (p. 300), which is linked to notions of geographical and symbolic powers that can influence the process of nation-building through conceptualizations of national identities (Adams & Jansson, 2012). However, research has also shown that space and place don’t just influence conceptions of macro environments but can also inform behavior, status, and identity formation in micro environments such as offices (Eaves & Leathers, 1991; Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). Physical features of an office environment—often personalized by the office workers—hold a communicative function as they demarcate social position and status. “Personal attributes and social locations are integral aspects of identity, as seen by both self and others” (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007, p. 199). In other words, office workers often personalize spaces and hence turn them into places as an expression of their identity (Wells, 2000).

Several scholars have suggested that physical space is essential in online identity construction. Couldry (2012) defined the range of social media practices that increasingly include the creation and sharing of selfies as a process of “showing and being shown” (p. 48) and “presencing,” or “managing through media a continuous presence-to-others across space” (p. 49). As such, selfies contribute to what Licoppe (2004) calls “connected presence”: the seamless connectivity between individuals and the preservation or management of relationships, social roles, and identities across space. Lasén and Gómez-Cruz (2009) argue that self-portraits or selfies “are contributing to the renegotiation of the public and private divide” (p. 206). Places that were considered public and private are now much more fluid as the clear divide between these concepts has been challenged through digital photography. Yet, Hess (2015) argues selfies can also confound the public and the private because as “selfies are frequently taken in private settings, they also feature places that are notable and public … In public, the capturing of a selfie records a personal moment that is shared, oddly with people who are not necessarily physically present” (p. 1637).

The spatial component of a selfie thus can directly impact upon the presentation of the self, as “self-portraits seem to be taking part in embodiment processes and in the shaping and knowing of the self, regarding the perception, conception, and relation to our own body” (Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009, p. 206). Hess (2015) argues similarly that selfies “attempt to represent the self as embodied in particular spaces” (p. 1630), affording users “the means to materialize the self via their immediate photographic composition in everyday existence, giving credence to our emplacement in the here and now” (p. 1631) through the assemblage of the four elements of the self, physical space, the device, and the network. Koliska and Roberts (2015) argue that “the visual placement of the self in a particular situation establishes associations between the self and the event or place, thus forming a specific impression of an identity the creator of the selfie aims to present to others” (p. 1681).

Selfies, we suggest, cannot be decontextualized from the space they have been shot in and which is recognizable to a viewer. An event or subject in photography is tied to the meaning of
places as only the combination of these elements create a social setting in which individuals establish and present a specific self. The specific social settings and spaces selfies depict have been used in some contexts to claim presence or mark an important event. Meese et al. (2015) examined selfies taken at funerals, arguing that “one key communicative aim of the funeral selfie is to signify presence, in order to provide vital context to one’s wider social network” (p. 1826). Similarly, Hochman and Manovich (2013) found that people shared digital images more frequently during Israel’s Independence and Memorial Day, concluding that sharing images is significantly related to social and cultural events. As places can be understood as crucial components of self-presentation within a selfie, it is critical to examine how cultural differences may influence the use of space and place in online environments.

The role of culture in “selfie-presentation” online

Identity does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded and shaped by national identities and cultural values that are bound to geographic particularisms. Greenfeld (1992) points out that national identities are “the most common and salient form of particularism” in a globalized and interconnected world. Even though the idea of the nation-state and national identities are constructed and primarily a “cultural idea” (Robertson, 1995, p. 34), the sheer existence of a nation-state is often bound to the notion of a physical existence in space. Moreover, the notion of a nation is often closely connected to the idea of home, which, in itself an imagined construct, is linked to an actual place as a marker of identity (Morley & Robins, 1995). This is primarily achieved through establishing a difference to the “other.” As the notion of home is situated in or at least linked to a specific space, other spaces also carry meaning as unfamiliar or foreign (Morley & Robins, 1995).

Research has generally indicated that the dominant US culture tends to be more individualistic and emphasizes self-reliance compared to the dominant Chinese culture, which has a more collective orientation. Pan, Chaffee, Chu, and Ju (1994) identified six major differences between the cultural systems of China and the United States, including, “US culture values the individual personality, whereas traditional Chinese culture weighs heavily a person’s duties to family, clan, and state” (p. 24). The selfie has frequently been defined as an individualistic act, placing the individual centrally in the photo and as an actor in the meaning-making activity. In a Chinese cultural context that traditionally (in offline behavior) is considered collectivist, the selfie may appear to present something of a contradiction for the user.

Another difference often noted between US and Chinese culture is that of context. Hall (1981) categorized cultures as high- or low-context; high-context cultures attach more importance to context, and use indirect, ambiguous, and harmonious communication, while low-context cultures rely more on direct, objective, and accurate information that is not context-dependent. Studies in cultural psychology have suggested that “people from East Asian cultures (e.g. China, Korea, and Japan) tend to pay greater attention to contextual information than their counterparts in Western cultures” (Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan, & Nisbett, 2008, p. 1260). In the selfie, place is one of the contextual elements used to determine meaning, and therefore could be used differently in cultures that rely on different levels of context. This varied focus on context was also shown to be significant in the cognition and information processing of visual content (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). People from East Asian cultures process visual information holistically by taking the peripheral information into account when explaining events or meanings around the salient or central visual object (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). In contrast, Americans tend to be more analytical by focusing primarily on the main or salient object and various meaning-making categories to which the object may belong.
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(Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). In the case of selfies, peripheral information such as space or place may therefore be of more importance within the Chinese context, as the construction of the self within a photograph could be specifically dependent on contextual information.

While Lin (2001) found significant differences in advertising strategies in China and the United States, including that US ads were “more likely to use individualism/independence appeals than is a society such as China,” (p. 91) the study found some areas where differences were disappearing, such as the use of “status appeal,” which was not significantly different between the Chinese and US commercials. Lin (2001) proposed the idea of localizing imported culture and adapting it to local norms and traditions as an explanation for this phenomenon.

While all the accounts posting in English on Twitter are certainly not based in the United States, Twitter and the norms that developed there are reflective of a US cultural framework, and certainly a Western cultural framework. This is particularly true when considering the site’s English-speaking users on a spectrum from the Chinese high-context culture to the US low-context culture. We therefore consider the cultural context of Twitter to be more similar to that of the United States in particular and Western in general.

A third culture that plays a critical role in taking and sharing selfies is the Internet culture, which exists not in any particular national context, but has its own norms and values, and may supersede or intersect with national cultural values and behaviors. Porter (1997) noted, 20 years ago, that the culture of the Internet “is a product of the peculiar conditions of virtual acquaintance that prevail online, a collective adaptation to the high frequency of anonymous, experimental, and even fleeting encounters familiar to anyone who has ventured into a newsgroup debate” (p. xi). In the two decades since, the Internet culture has further developed its own extensive, complicated, and diverse set of norms, values, and practices, even a language that may be considered global in nature. In comparing social media practices in two different national cultural contexts, it is impossible to ignore the third cultural context of the Internet. As Macek (2005) points out, “cyberculture is an ambiguous, confusing, unclear term describing a set of issues. It can be used in a descriptive, analytical or ideological sense.” Cyberculture is continuously evolving, and it is not the goal of this article to define or identify cyberculture, but to acknowledge that it may intersect with national cultural practices online.

As selfies are viewed as intentional representations of the self, but are taken within a particular physical and cultural context, we posed the following research question: (1) How are space and place used in the self-presentation of individuals posting selfies in the United States and China? At this point, no known study has investigated the use of place and space in selfies as contributing factors of self-representation. Hence, we chose this rather open research question to explore specific cultural features and differences in the use of place and space in selfies within the US and Chinese contexts. As selfies can be considered a global phenomenon that constitutes a significant part of a worldwide online culture, we want to better understand if culture may impact how users on Twitter (primarily US-based) and Weibo (primarily Chinese-based) make use of space and place to create and present a specific self within publicly shared selfies.

Methods

Sample

The samples for this study were drawn from two micro-blogging sites, Twitter and Sina Weibo. Both sites allow for a quick exchange of messages and photos.
Sina Weibo

China is the world’s largest Internet market, with more than 600 million users, although the Internet penetration in the country is still far below that of most developed countries (World Bank, 2014). Sina Weibo is a Chinese social media site that provides a platform for users to share pictures and text, with a 140-character limit, much like Twitter. Weibo was launched by the Sina Corporation in August 2009, 1 month after the Chinese government blocked access to Twitter. In 2015, the site claimed 89 million daily active users and 198 million monthly active users (Bischoff, 2015).

Yu, Asur, and Huberman (2011) found “vast differences” in the content shared on Weibo compared to that shared on Twitter. “In China, people tend to use Sina Weibo to share jokes, images and videos and a significantly large percentage of posts are retweets” (Yu et al., 2011). In contrast, they found that mainstream media and current events had a much greater influence on trending topics on Twitter. This is consistent with previous research on Twitter and other social media, showing a heavy influence by mainstream media sources (see, for example, Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011). Social media in China exist in the somewhat contradictory state of being both the site of vast user participation, and subject to censorship by monitors who redact unwanted content from sites (see, for example, Mina, 2014).

Twitter

Twitter was launched in 2006 and rapidly gained popularity, boasting 313 million active monthly users in June 2016 (Twitter, 2016). While more than three-quarters of Twitter accounts are registered outside the United States (Twitter, 2016), English is the most-used language on Twitter (Mocanu et al., 2013). As such, it is difficult to separate the “US context” on Twitter, especially given that the online world does not have the same nation-state boundaries as the physical world, and that many popular social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) originated in the United States and then were adopted by a diverse international network. Certainly an argument could be made that the cultural norms established by the parameters set by the functionality of US-originated social media sites then spread to other countries, but just as often, the norms on social media sites evolve according to user behavior. It is with this understanding that we nonetheless view Twitter in English as reflecting US and Western culture.

The influence of US culture on the functionality of Twitter is also reflected in how users shape the format and conventions of the social media site. Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011) point out that sociocultural conventions can impact technological and digital features on Twitter. The researchers suggest Twitter should be thought of as a conversational microblog, and identify some of the ways Twitter users have played a role in the creation of conventions of the site, such as @ mentions, retweets, and hashtags, some of which were later adopted into the site’s functionality.

Twitter has been the subject of several studies regarding network behavior, its use for sharing information, its influence of shaping public discourse and more. Hermida (2010) suggested that Twitter and other micro-blogging systems are awareness systems that enable “citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them” (p. 301). Within social networking sites, such news and events can be of a much more personal nature and therefore Twitter is an ideal vehicle to distribute selfies, which can also serve as a form of participatory journalism (Koliska & Roberts, 2015). Although Twitter enabled photo-sharing in 2011, the site is often a vehicle to disseminate selfies via links to Instagram, Shots, and other social media platforms that primarily use photos.
Regarding the ethics of data collection through social media, the posts to Twitter and Weibo we collected and analyzed are assumed to be public, and no identifying information about the users was kept associated with the selfies once they were selected for analysis or shared in this article.

Procedure

Selfies were gathered from the two popular social media sites (Twitter and Weibo) over the same 1-week period in the summer of 2014. Images on Twitter were gathered using NodeXL, a social network-analyzing tool that automatically scrapes Tweets. Tweets with the tag “selfie” were collected over a 1-hour period twice each day for a full week. Images on Weibo were gathered by student researchers searching the main Weibo feed for posts with the hashtag “selfie” in either English or Chinese, over a 1-hour period twice each day for the same week. While NodeXL allowed for a convenient collection of tweets from Twitter, no off-the-shelf software for scraping Weibo data was available at the time of the data collection. As no automated process was available to us to gather Weibo data, we had to manually select Weibo posts that used the hashtag selfie. Hashtags (keywords prefixed with the symbol #) are useful “as a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between more or less large groups of users,” and to facilitate “the formation of ad hoc publics around specific themes and topics” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

This analysis was focused on the images as presented through the social media sites. An ethnographic approach, such as interviews with users, would have relied on self-reporting, which provides a valid perspective and one that could be explored in the future studies, but this study was interested in analyzing self-presentation through an artifact that is shared publicly, that is, to examine the decoded message rather than the encoded message. Moreover, this study is a first examination of the use of space and place in selfies, so a content analysis was chosen to determine whether the use of space is at all relevant in selfies in two cultural contexts. In other words, before exploring possible motives for constructing a selfie with the use of a specific space and place, we wanted to show that space and place indeed can influence the construction of selfies.

After posts were gathered, researchers examined each item to check for validity, removing reposts of celebrity selfies, pornography, or other irrelevant data. Finally, a random sample of the collected data was selected for coding. Each image was coded manually by two student researchers for several elements, including (1) location portrayed, (2) framing of location (portion of frame given to location), (3) elements that identify place included, (4) framing of self in image, (5) other objects or people included in the frame, (6) text commentary, (7) culturally specific visual elements of presentation pertinent to a specific country or region, (8) varied demographical markers (age group, gender etc.), and (9) particular memes and themes that possibly dominate the self-presentation of individuals. From Weibo, 427 images were gathered over the course of the 7 days, and 226 included evidence of physical location around the face. From Twitter, initially 12,426 images were scraped using NodeXL over 7 days, out of which 515 images were randomly selected to approximately match the number of manually gathered selfies from Weibo. From the Twitter sample, 196 selfies included evidence of physical location.

A second coding effort categorized the locations featured in each selfie. Two researchers coded 50 images each for public versus private location (the distinction being sometimes fluid, but generally private was understood as a place where one had an expectation of a limited number of known or familiar witnesses—generally a home or office or personal car would qualify) and used a grounded theory method, working from the data set to generate a list of categories. After initial comparison
and re-coding for intercoder reliability, researchers coded the remaining images in each data set. The categories used were domestic, workplace, commercial (e.g. restaurants, shops and shopping malls, stadiums, salons, or movie theaters), public transit, personal car, civic spaces (such as public parks, playgrounds, and city streets), academic spaces, fitness (generally gyms or workout classes), healthcare (hospitals), tourist attractions, and hotels.

To explore if the use of space and place in selfies was dependent on the platform used and its respective cultural conventions, we coded each selfie in our sample according to the amount of space (from a quarter to three-quarters) left in the image, that is, how much of the image did not cover the face of the selfie photographer. We also coded for the general location of selfies taken, differentiating between indoor and outdoor to get a better understanding of the intention to include personally significant places in the image. In this respect, we also looked at the position of a person’s face within the frame, whether it was more centered or set to the side of an image, which could be understood as a deliberate act to include space within the selfie. We also coded for elements that were included in the selfie, such as other people, objects, and animals to explore possible differences of the selfie context across the platforms.

Intercoder reliability for these categories was estimated using Cohen’s kappa. A kappa value of 0.80 represents outstanding or very high intercoder reliability (Viera & Garrett, 2005). The intercoder reliability estimate for the categories is 0.85.

Analysis

**Content analysis**

To tease out how cultural norms may influence the use of space in publicly shared selfies on Twitter and Weibo, we conducted a content analysis of the various elements, locations, and spheres that were included in the area of the selfie not covered by the face of the selfie photographer. Content analysis allows to “describe communication messages or their characteristics in particular cultural contexts” (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 149), which we deemed an ideal approach to investigate contextual information included in the space of selfies. According to the literature, the use of contextual information is an indication of cultural difference between East Asians and Westerners or US Americans. Moreover, content analysis offers an adequate basis for a comparative study (Van Lear, Sheehan, Withers, & Walker, 2005) as we attempt to tease out possible differences between selfies shared on Twitter and Weibo.

On both sites, Twitter and Weibo, the number of selfies that showed the location of the photographer/user outnumbered selfies that included no evidence of location, indicating that location is often a significant factor in visual self-representation. Users of both Weibo and Twitter shared selfies when they were outside or at places of interest in their life, such as a gym or restaurant. Domestic locations were also common, including bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens. Of the 226 selfies from Weibo that showed a location, 60% featured a private space, one that users made public by posting to social media. Half (74) of those selfies taken in private spaces were in domestic locations, most commonly bedrooms and bathrooms. Of the 90 selfies taken in public spaces, commercial and civic spaces were the most popular categories, accounting for a combined 71% of images. Commercial spaces (32) included shops and restaurants, while civic spaces included parks and city streets. There were 26 selfies taken in the workplace and 21 taken in personal cars—compared with six taken on public transit. A few selfies were posted from tourist attractions (5), hotels (7), schools or academic settings (7), fitness places (5), and even hospitals (1).
There were 196 selfies from Twitter that showed a location, nearly evenly split between those that were taken in a private location (97) and those that were taken in a public location (99). Many of the selfies gathered on Twitter were cross-posted from Instagram, Shots, and other photo-sharing sites or apps. There were 82 selfies taken in domestic spaces and 16 taken in personal cars. Civic spaces were the next-most common place for selfies in the sample, with 50. Workplace only featured in three selfies, while commercial spaces were featured in 25. Tourist attractions (7), fitness places (5), academic settings (5), hotels (1), and public transit (1) were represented in similar numbers to the Weibo sample.

On both sites, users shared more selfies captured in private spaces, which were then moved to the public space of social media. Domestic places were the most common site of selfies shared on both sites. Commercial spaces were comparably popular on the two sites. A relatively high number of selfies taken in personal cars were shared on both sites, especially compared to selfies taken on public transportation. The most marked differences between selfies posted on Weibo and Twitter were the number of selfies posted in the workplace—11% of the selfies from Weibo were taken in the workplace, compared to only 1.5% on Twitter.

Chi-square test of independence: exploring use of space and place across platforms

We conducted chi-square tests for independence to investigate possible cultural differences in the use of contextual information (space and place) that may be tied to the platforms on which selfies were shared. As this study focuses on the use of space and place in selfies, we explored whether there was a relationship between the platforms and the size of space used within the frame of the selfie, that is, the portion of the picture that doesn’t show the subject/photographer of the selfie (see Figure 1). A chi-square test for independence was performed to examine the relationship between platforms and use of space in selfies. The relationship between these variables was significant, \( \chi^2 (4, N = 422) = 52.74, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .354. Twitter users were more likely to use more space in their selfies.

Chi-square tests for independence were also performed to examine possible relationships between platform and gender, sphere, face position, location, and picture elements included within a selfie (see Figure 2). Again all of these relationships were significant; platform–gender: \( \chi^2 (2, N = 422) = 60.46, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .38. In this sample, men on Weibo were less likely to post selfies that included some space or place; platform–face position: \( \chi^2 (2, N = 422) = 16.64, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .2. Twitter users in our sample were more likely to position their faces toward the side when taking selfies, which could indicate an intention to deliberately include space in a selfie; platform–sphere: \( \chi^2 (2, N = 422) = 6.15, p < .013 \), with Cramer’s phi = .12. In our sample, Weibo users posted fewer selfies taken in a public space than Twitter users; platform–location: \( \chi^2 (2, N = 422) = 21.97, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .23. Twitter users posted selfies that were taken outside more often than Weibo users in our sample; platform–picture elements: \( \chi^2 (2, N = 422) = 10.37, p < .006 \), with Cramer’s phi = .16. In our sample, Weibo users were less likely to include other people in selfies posted.

To determine if the use of space may be dependent on the position of the face within a selfie, we ran two chi-square tests for independence for face position and space separately on Twitter and Weibo. Both tests showed a significant relationship (Twitter: \( \chi^2 (4, N = 196) = 22.28, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .34; Weibo: \( \chi^2 (4, N = 226) = 48.19, p < .001 \), with Cramer’s phi = .46). Across both
Figure 1. Percentage of selfies that used different amounts of space on Twitter and Weibo.

Figure 2. Differences across Twitter and Weibo.
platforms, the increase of space in a selfie was accompanied by an increased positioning of the face to the side. We also tested if gender may be related to use of space in shared selfies: on neither site did a relationship exist.

Discussion

The production and sharing of a selfie can be seen as an effort to project an idealized representation of the self. Social and cultural values are therefore reflected in the elements used to construct that idealized self, and the choice of place is one of those elements. Selfie-takers use places—rich with personal and social meaning—to contribute to the self-representation and to make a specific claim about themselves by presenting themselves in the chosen place. In doing so, they also imbue specific spaces in the world with meaning and importance, and create personalized places that reflect values. It is a co-creative relationship in which users represent themselves in places they perceive as meaningful and impart meaning to those places.

Selfies were used by individuals on Weibo and Twitter to place themselves at public and private sites, moving content from private spaces (bedrooms, bathrooms, cars) to the public, and also from public spaces to the personal circle on social media. The choice of location for the selfies in our sample reflects value placed on idealized social roles in different places, highlighting specific identities within the various settings. These identities often reflected a productive work life, an exciting social life featuring outings to tourist sites or civic spaces, and an extraordinary domestic life. High value was also placed on activities in commercial spaces, generally shopping and eating out, indicating a vibrant social life while associating oneself with desirable commercial products. There is some indication that users prefer to take selfies in a more private and secure space and then share them and make them public. It may be that people feel more comfortable taking pictures when they are not being observed as the practice of taking selfies may also be understood as a socially undesirable expression of vanity. In a private setting, people have more control over the self-representation, so the act of taking a selfie in a public space may be less appealing.

Overall, the content analysis showed little difference in the use of place in selfies posted to Twitter and Weibo. Despite cultural differences in the two cultural contexts of those sites, users placed themselves in very similar spatial settings and locations in selfies. At the same time, the literature suggests that Chinese culture tends to be more high-context and US culture tends to be more low-context (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005; Nisbett et al., 2001). While the performed chi-square test for independence suggests that the use of contextual information (i.e. amount of space used) in shared selfies is indeed related to the social media platforms and as such, may be dependent on cultural norms (such as high- vs low-context), our data also suggests a possible reversal of these cultural norms. More users on Twitter in our sample included 50% and more space in their selfies than Weibo users. In other words, Twitter users provided more often spatial and as such more context information than Weibo users. Our data thus adds a new perspective to the body of research that examines holistic versus analytic perception of information based on cultural norms.

While the content analysis suggests that the Internet culture may be more salient than national culture in the practice of selfies, due in part to the fact that selfies originated as an online practice, rather than as an existing cultural practice that migrated online, the chi-square test for independence indicates that national culture may still be very relevant in the use of space of publicly shared selfies.
This research indicates that self-presentation through selfies is affected by the places people chose to present themselves. Thus, the analysis of selfies has to take place into consideration, as these places can alter self-presentation and perceptions when users position themselves in a place. When selfies are shared, they can be understood as vehicles to establish or strengthen specific identities or self-presentation, while also molding the perception of the place. Thus, selfie photographers could draw on specific shared meanings of places to invoke specific identities (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011). On the other hand, they can re-construct the shared meanings of a specific place (Massey, 1994). Rooney et al. (2010) argue that, given the interactive nature of how such place identities are constructed, created, and preserved, a “sense of place needs to be recognized as a key resource for enhancing social identities” (p. 47). Selfies can be understood as communicative devices with a dual function: first, in constructing idealized presentations of the self and second, in constructing place identities through sharing and social interactions online as the mass of users create and reflect values back at each other.

This first exploratory examination of the use of space and place in selfies across major cultural boundaries indicates no major differences between Twitter and Weibo in terms of the places where selfies were taken, but a difference in how much contextual information is included in a selfie. This lack of significant difference in terms of places may indicate a shared cultural understanding of the practice around the world, as the use of the hashtag “selfie” and the conventions of the selfie appear to suggest. The use of the selfie convention requires “that these viewers have been adequately socialized through having seen, taken, or heard tell of selfies” (Frosh, 2015, p. 1608). Beyond this, the use of similar places indicates a commonality of social life or global lifestyle that is influenced by similar values, especially domestic life, consumption, and certain status symbols.

The interest in capturing and showing personal cars, trips to tourist sites, and so on can be seen—beyond the use as mnemonic devices—as an effort to demonstrate a leisure lifestyle: a certain economic and social class that is also evident from the use of a smartphone and a social networking site and the participation in sharing a selfie. These similarities may indicate that the technologically triggered global selfie phenomenon contributes to or, at the very least, reflects the homogenization of self-representation across different cultures, and perhaps even cultural values, such as conspicuous consumption.

Limitations of this study include several of the factors affecting social media research, such as difficulty in ascertaining that all users posting on a site share the same cultural context as the site. In addition, chi-square test for independence can only show if a relationship between use of space in selfies and a platform exist, which in our sample strongly suggests the influence of cultural norms. As such, we only hinted at contextual differences based on cultural norms. Thus further, more rigorous statistical analyses are needed to confirm the implications of our findings.

The future research might ask users explicitly what they hope to achieve by constructing selfies in particular ways, or by framing themselves in a location. The use and meaning of selfies is continuously evolving, as new practices and understandings are introduced, and adopted or rejected. Such practices as taking group selfies or selfies using a “selfie stick,” or advocacy selfies taken to promote a cause have been introduced, spread in popularity and adapted in response to and in reaction with other elements of online identity formation, memes, or behaviors. The selfie stick, in particular, allows the user to include even more space and other people in selfies, permitting a kind of self-presentation that is even more reliant on identifying with other objects or people. Future research might consider how these new practices reveal or result from changing social values or practices.
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