Female Self-presentation through Online Dating Applications

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Online self-presentation plays a vital role in online dating applications due to online filtering and contacting the desirable potential partners through presentational clues. Applying qualitative data collected from young female participants and the theoretical Two-Component Model of Leary & Kowalski (1990) on the motivation process and construction process, this paper presents an overview of a study based on the comprehension of participants' motivation process for dating profiles to explore the construction process of online dating self-presentation approaches. The results indicate that through the self-presentational clues of photography, text, and video display for constructing online dating profiles, young women can selectively and strategically demonstrate the partial and ornamental self with physical and ideological attractiveness. Simultaneously, they struggle with their ideal and real self in the process of online dating self-presentation.

1. BACKGROUND

“Women […] are most difficult to nurture. If one is close to them, they lose their reserve, while if one is distant, they feel resentful.”
– Confucius (551–479 BCE)

Traditionally marriage has been arranged by parents; witness the weekly Shanghai marriage market that continues until recent times, with only parents present (see Figure 1). However online mobile access has enabled young people to connect much more easily and directly, without parental intervention or even knowledge (e.g., see Figure 2).

Connecting online has been a motivation for individuals and organisations since the technology of the internet has made this possible (Bowen 1999). Digital culture has become increasingly important in recent years with the wide online access through mobile devices (Giannini & Bowen 2019a). Digital and real life have become more and more blurred with the progress of time (Bowen & Giannini 2014; 2021). There are some gender differences with respect to preferences for online presentation...
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(Boiano 2008). The concept of beauty can be enhanced and idealised using digital technology (Wiedemann 2001). More recently, online communities and interaction through social media have become important, including acting as a “digital citizen”, engaging in societal issues (Borda & Bowen 2021). For example, the #MeToo activist movement has been a worldwide phenomenon from the United States (Giannini 2019) to China (Han 2019).

Self-presentation is the process of conveying information about yourself (or one’s image) to other people. The presentation may be meant to match: 1) one’s own self-image; 2) an audience’s expectations or preferences (Baumeister & Hutton 1987). This has become much easier with respect to individuals and a potentially worldwide audience with the ever more interconnected infrastructure online. This may be for professional or personal reasons. In this paper, we explore the self-presentation of females with respect to online dating.

Nowadays, online dating which has been described as a process of “encountering potential partners through online profiles” (Finkel et al. 2012, p.3), has become a widely accepted method for individuals to meet potential partners. According to Rosenfeld et al. (2019), online dating has dramatically subverted the pattern of seeking and establishing courtship and relationships. In other words, most online daters will filter and online contact their preferable potential partners through the self-presentational clues of photographs, textual description, and video display; they will use these for the construction of their online dating profiles and potential daters are expected to review these before meeting. Thus, online self-presentation plays a vital role in the online dating environment.

Scholars have been interested in the role of online self-presentation in physical attractiveness and relationship initiation due in part to physical attractiveness being a crucial parameter in dating circumstances. Additionally, since physical attractiveness is regarded as a kind of premium in the field of mate selection, daters may manipulate dating information related to physical attractiveness in the process of online self-presentation to increase their level of visual perception involved in physical attractiveness (Hancock & Toma 2009). As well as creating an impression of the desired self through strategic and selective self-presentation, packaging, beautification and editing in social interactions (Leary 1996). This may be the reason why an essential motivation in the process of constructing an online dating profile for individuals is to shape their social presence and gender attraction through exquisite text descriptions, embellished photographs, and edited videos.

The research outlined in this paper focuses on exploring the self-presentation of young women through profiles on online dating applications. The overall presentation is based on Li (2021) and covers:

- Gender differences in self-presentation, briefly explaining the different manifestations of gender in online self-presentation and the reason that the description of online representation and gender is relevant in relation to online dating.
- The aims that drove the exploration of this topic and a statement of the research problem.
- The approach to the research methodology design.
- An analysis of the detailed results in Li (2021) and conclusions.

2. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELF-PRESENTATION

“Gender consists of the meanings ascribed to male and female social categories within a culture” (Cifre et al. 2018, p.2). Therefore, the “penetration” and integration of culture in people’s psychology is crucial for the formation of people’s societal gender identity (Wood & Eagly 2015). The thought and behaviour patterns of individuals and interactive communication may originate from their self-recognition of “culturally feminine and masculine meanings attached to men and women” (Wood & Eagly 2012, p. 461). In fact, much is known about gender differences in disclosure patterns between men and women (Dolgin & Minowa 1997).

For instance, since the motivations and benefits of height and weight are driven by gender schemas in online dating self-presentation, for the purpose of portraying themselves more physical attractive to the opposite sex, both male and female daters may make numerical adjustments to their actual dimensions of weight and height that are conducive to increasing their attractiveness (Toma et al. 2008). Further research indicated that gender differences in self-presentation have indicated that compared with men, women pay more attention to creating affirmative self-images (Hafekamp et al. 2012). In general, seductive individuals are typically identified as more ideal potential partners for dating (Gangestad & Scheyd 2005). Physical attractiveness was regarded as the exclusive crucial characteristic that can predict whether a dater still has a desire to meet the partner again (Thornhill & Grammer 1999).

According to the supplemental analysis of Meltzer et al. (2014, p.1), physical attractiveness will not only affect the judgment criteria for mutual selection of “speed-dating paradigms” daters, but also has “implications for long-term relationships”. Eastwick &
Finkel (2008) also report that in the dimension of choosing a long-term relationship partner, male daters tend to pay more attention to the physical attractiveness of appearance than females. This may be the reason why women prefer to elaborate select exquisite photography to enhance their dating profile online according to male norms in the online dating environment. Additionally, because of women's strategy for establishing online communication relationships, in the process of constructing online dating profiles, young women prefer to apply soft and approachable vocabulary for the description of their personality.

In terms of linguistic strategy, males are more inclined to use power and status-oriented linguistic strategies, while females typically apply subordinate communication skills and strategies (Carli & Bukatko 2000). Hence, for young women using online dating applications, the criterion of sophistication in establishing an online profile may be completely disparate from that of male counterparts as gender pattern influences and reflects different identity and self-presentation concerns (Manago et al. 2008). In addition, it is worth noting that although online and offline self-presentation vary in form of information disclosure, according to authors such as Magnuson and Dundes (2008), gender differences do not seem to be influenced by delivery media and platforms in the process of self-presentation, which means that both men and women conform to the traditional masculinity and femininity norms.

The research aimed to investigate the self-presentation of young women through their profiles on online dating applications. It commenced by focusing on online dating, online self-presentation, and online dating profiles. A motivation for research on this topic was the widespread social phenomenon of “leftover women” in China; Much of Chinese society “devalues unmarried women in their mid to late twenties because of their so-called ‘leftover’ status” (Liu 2017, p.41). Under pressure to match and choose relationships, the number of single young women, who are motivated to date online through self-presentation and initiative is on the rise. However, the percentage of young women who absorb long-term romantic relationships is pessimistic, especially for young women with higher education in large cities.

According to You et al. (2016), education level seems to be inversely proportional to young women’s willingness to marry. University education is reported to reduce the likelihood of marriage by around 2.9% to 3.6%, while holding a postgraduate degree further reduces it by 8.4% to 10.4% (You et al. 2016). Therefore, how these young women seek romantic relationships through the self-presentational clues of profiles in online dating applications in the contradictions and interweaving of physical and ideological attractiveness, ideal and real self has become a very meaningful research topic.

3. RESEARCH AIMS

Through semi-structured interviews where they elaborate how they represent themselves on online dating applications, issues about this research orientation are also considered, such as:

- How do young women understand the self-presentational profile of online dating applications? What and how do young women think in the process of constructing online dating profiles?
- What specific experiences have influenced and changed their perception and evaluation of online dating profiles?

According to their responses to the interview questions (Li 2021, Appendix 4), the construction of online dating profiles through means such as textual description, photographs, and videos, can be a diversified way for young women to present themselves. The research aims were:

- To comprehend how young women understand their static self-presentational profiles in online dating applications, including:
- To understand physical attractiveness in online dating.
- Aggregation of understanding selective and strategic presentation of self through the profiles of online dating.
- To analyse how young women represent themselves through profiles on online dating applications, including:
  - Analysing how young women apply profile clues such as pictures, text, and video features, to demonstrate their self-presentational dating portfolios.
  - Investigating how young women construct self-presentational portfolios with clues of profiles.

The specific research questions were:

- How do young women comprehend their static self-presentational profiles in online dating applications?
- How do young women represent themselves through profiles on online dating applications?
4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, qualitative research was conducted in this study. Through using qualitative methods, this research aims to comprehend how young women understand their static self-presentational profiles in online dating applications. On this basis, the in-depth analysis on how young women represent themselves through profiles on online dating applications was explored. The study implemented semi-structured interviews, with 15 questions focused on exploring the self-presentation of young women through the narrative of profile construction on online dating applications, to collect data. Because while providing reliable, comparable data in the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews have reasonable and objective advantages, while still allowing researchers to interpret and investigate the opinions of respondents from different perspectives to comprehend the deep logic of the data thoroughly (Borg and Gall, 1983). Several specific issues were addressed in the semi-structured interviews, such as the self-presentational profile of online dating, how to demonstrate your static self-revealing portfolios with the clues of photographs, textual descriptions and video display in online dating, and the self-struggle between the ideal and real.

Adopting the method of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the study reported here has elaborated on:

1. online dating profiles as carriers of “who am I?”;
2. the self-presentational clues of physical attractiveness and ideological attractiveness being different in constructing profiles;
3. video in profiles bringing more multi-dimensional experience and rich dynamic perception transmission properties in personality shaping and self-presentation;
4. conflict-in the self-struggle between the ideal and real.

Table 1 above outlines the phases of the approach used in this research. Figure 3 overleaf shows the overall structure of the data analysis.

| Phase                        | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Familiarising                | At this stage, in addition to repeatedly listening to the recording, the manual recording of the interview that has just ended is extremely valuable, because the actual circumstances of the interview at this moment is unambiguous and quite approximate to the authenticity of the data itself (e.g., the participant tone). Then “reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87). |
| Generating initial codes    | At this stage, the code for the entire data set was formulated according to the research question and interview schedule, looking for codes related to the specific question asked in the interview data. Attention was paid to the “interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87), which were potential data for defining themes. |

| Searching for themes         | The process of searching for themes was similar to advancements of preliminary data codes, abounding explanations, concepts, and areas of interest. This phase was to further establish the correlation between data and research questions. |
| Review of themes            | During the review phase, the “thematic map” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87) model (see Figure 1) was applied primarily, which was a convenient way to visualise the themes that were found and start to think about how they relate to other themes. |
| Defining and naming themes  | At this phase, in addition to defining insightful subject items in the “thematic map” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87), it is quite necessary to elaborate the rationale and essence, and link back to the theoretical construction of literature review. |
| Producing a report          | During report generation, the participants transcribed and translated content was selected to interpret and validate the defined themes. These aspects are reported on in detail in Li (2021, chapter 3). |
Figure 3: The "Thematic map" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87) of the overall structural layout of data analysis. The overall structural layout of this study is based on the theoretical Two-Component Model of Leary & Kowalski (1990) of motivation process and construction process. Based on in-depth comprehension of the participants' motivation process for dating profiles, this process was used to conduct in-depth analysis and elaborate on their profile construction process.
5. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Using qualitative research methods, this study conducted 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young women, investigating how they self-present themselves through their profiles of online dating applications. The participants were from Canada, China, UK, and USA. Apps used included CoffeeMeetsBagel, MOMO, Soul, Tantan, Tinder, and Zhengaiwang. Detailed information on the data obtained is available in Li (2021).

Specifically, guided by the self-presentational theoretical framework of the Two-Component Model of Leary & Kowalski (1990), based on in-depth analysis of how young women comprehend their static self-presentational profiles constructed through online self-presentation cues in online dating applications (Ellison et al. 2011), the research explored how young women driven by their self-presentation motivation look to achieve the purpose of charming presentation or attract potential dating partners through selectively and strategically presenting textual, pictorial, and video self-representational cues within the profiles of online dating. In the process of the narrative, these female participants not only elaborated on the cognition and positioning of themselves in the online dating environment, however they also comprehend the significance of the self-display carrier role of online dating profiles. This is, online dating profiles are carriers of “who am I?”.

Three of the participants believe that their aims of self-presentation are seeking soulmates. Four of the participants also mentioned soul mates frequently in interviews. Thus, different from previous literature on the dimensions of physical attractiveness, during the narrative and thinking process of self-presentation, they pay more attention to the disclosure of attraction signals such as the fit of thinking pattern and knowledge structure. However, in the process of interviews, they mentioned they also pay attention to the self-display effect of their attractive appearance in online dating profiles. The struggle of their online dating self-presentation behaviour is that it seems to portray superficial behaviour if potential daters are attracted by their physical appearance.

Furthermore, four of the participants elaborated that they showed their external and physical attractiveness in photos on their profiles according to the male norms in the online dating environment. Young female participants seemed to consider that the pictorial decoration of self-presentation through profiles would immediately impact their attractiveness to potential partners. Based on the self-representational inner motivation process (Leary & Kowalski 1990), the methods they used to construct their online dating profiles mainly revolved around beautifying and decorating their self-representation through diversified photos or selfies. Specifically, they selectively and strategically self-present photographs of their attractive bodies and likeable facial features to cater to male aesthetics. Thus, are women the charm of physical attraction or the charm of thought in the process of self-exhibition in online dating environments? This might be an interesting topic that is worth continuing to explore more deeply in the future.

In addition, regardless of the pursuit of physical attractiveness or ideological charm, they all seem to have experienced the struggle to achieve a balance between their real and ideal selves in the process of elaborating their self-presentation and returning to the inquiry that philosophers have been struggling with for a long time, who am I? Here, this issue may imply young women’s thinking on how to construct their dating identity in an online dating environment. Besides, among the 11 participants, only two younger participants made it clear that they were not looking for long-term relationships at the time of the interviews, and the remaining participants expressed the desire to establish long-term relationships.

However, according to their explanation, online dating applications like Tinder, Tantan, and MOMO are not their ideal dating platform for finding long-term relationships, because they believe that these platforms are full of individuals looking for boring hit-ups or sexual hook-ups. They prefer platforms with strict profile review to find serious long-term relationships. This consideration is a typically critical factor in studying how young women present themselves. This is because their attitude and inner motivation towards the platform determines the way they construct their profiles for online dating to present themselves.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are mainly manifested in sample recruitment. In this project, all 11 participants were acquaintances and friends of the researcher who were recruited through convenience sampling. This is even though the methodological aspect of the research setup included two sampling strategies, namely convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Emerson 2015). It was desirable to use two sampling strategies because every sample technology has space for improvement in the population dimension, and researchers can only compensate for these limitations through using a variety of sampling techniques superimposed on each other. However, due to the actual situation, snowball sampling did not yield the corresponding participants; hence, convenience sampling was the only one used, and it has limitations. In fact, the rationale behind most researchers’ application of
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convenience sampling techniques is to acquiesce in the limitations of actual implementation (Etikan et al. 2016). Aware of the possibility of this limitation in advance, the implemented approach aimed to discuss the topic of this project from a professional and academic perspective in the interviewing process and attempted to conduct in-depth analysis and discussion from the perspective of the participants to obtain ponderable qualitative data. Hence, this project gathered enough interesting real analysis data and saturation in terms of data. However, the uniqueness of the sample is still an unavoidable problem. Although they are highly relevant to the research questions as participants, the lack of diversity and representation in terms of cultural background, educational background and personal experience may be the limitation. For example, young women with large discrepant educational attainment may have very different perspectives on how to show themselves in online dating. However, the data in this area cannot be traced and verified in detail based on the currently obtained data.

6. CONCLUSION

“Women hold up half the sky.”
– Mao Zedong (1893–1976)

China remains a patriarchal male-dominated society in the real world, especially at the upper echelons (Phillips 2017). Witness the case of Peng Shuai and the varying responses around the world (Yu 2021). However, with respect to online dating, there is more of a level playing field, as illustrated by the survey in this paper.

This study advances comprehension of the thought processes and modes of online self-presentation of young women through online dating profiles. In addition, the findings of this research indicate that online self-presentation plays a vital role in online dating applications. Through the self-presentational clues in their online dating profiles, young women selectively and strategically demonstrate the partial and ornamental self with physical and ideological attractiveness.

Simultaneously, they also struggle with the real and ideal self in the process of online dating self-presentation. Further, according to the participants’ data of this research, the introduction of the video personal display feature, which allows users to add a video of themselves on their profile on dating platforms, bringing a more multi-dimensional experience and rich dynamic perception transmission properties in personality shaping and self-presentation, is a welcoming feature that was positively evaluated by almost all participants in this research. However, it is worth noting there is less literature to support research in this area. Given the unique and intriguing findings of this research, there is much space and potential for further exploration of this aspect. Developments such as the “metaverse” (Dionisio et al. 2013) are likely to increase the use of technologies like virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) in the evolution of future apps.

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