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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chinese Females' Visual Sharing Obsession: Battling for Filtered Identity on Social Media

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Much literature regarding body image focuses on young adults, mainly females, and outcomes as body image dissatisfaction. However, their mental, social, and psychological desires, which compel them to objectify on social media, are rarely discussed. The current qualitative study, through in-depth interviews with young Chinese females from 18 years to 25 years, delved into their visual sharing practices. The study's findings exposed their overwhelming indulgence in visual sharing, which has become an obsession. They find alternate ways to craft their online personas and objectify themselves in the best possible manner. The study findings conclude that young Chinese females face growing psychological turmoil to compete in the virtual and visual context. The study recommends further research to offer a better policy to safeguard from potential psychological effects they might encounter.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape has changed worldwide and, more specifically, in China. In 2022, there were around 1.02 million social media users in China. Despite Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter being blocked in the country, local social networking sites such as Tencent, WeChat and Weibo have attracted millions of users, making China the world's biggest social media market. Among the social media users, half are females (1). Chinese women are more active on social media than men and spend an average of 40 per cent more time on social media than male users (2). The purposes of female social media use include sharing their daily lives, posting pictures, and waiting for comments (1). Not only in China but studies in Western countries also have observed many females engage in social media and spend more time in virtual communication than males (3). The characteristic of visual sharing on social

media is that it attracts more women than men. Female users prefer visual platforms like TikTok and Instagram and use more conversational and emotional language (4).

Women use social media to share and view visual content, like short videos and photos, and compare their looks with others (5). According to DeBroff (2017), 85% of women post photos to show life through visual images like photos and videos (6). Furthermore, women use photo editing software to present their idealised images on social media (7).

As a result, women on social media may see idealised images of their peers and compare themselves to these idealised images. Visual sharing and online presentation have become routine, particularly among women, regardless of country or origin (4). The indulgence in visual sharing leads to an addiction among women to constructing an online identity according to their choice. Even this online identity construction has recently been observed among educated females (8). Females use photo editing software to enhance their pictures before uploading them on social media and presenting a new identity to people (1).

Despite restrictions on certain SNSs in China, the number of users, particularly females, is growing, and Chinese-based SNSs are being used. Therefore, Chinese females have access to various social platforms and more freedom online. However, various quantitative studies have examined online time and its consequent impacts on women's body image, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. Limited qualitative studies identified the online practices and factors that compel them to be engaged visually.

Therefore, this qualitative study is focused on young Chinese females. Through in-depth interviews, the study explored Chinese females' social media practices, factors, and purposes of visual engagement. The purpose is to understand young Chinese females' online practices and visual behaviour, such as sharing images and videos.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chinese women use video and photo editing applications to transform and present their customised personalities online (1). These editing apps help young Chinese females adjust any details, create desired effects, and enhance facial features. Chinese women appear to appreciate being evaluated on social media, and followers respond positively, which may increase self-objectification (9).

Visual communication and sharing have become integral to women's lives, with the gradual exponential growth of social media and the desire to look more charming (10). It has also become an emotional need, causing a stressful situation where competition to look better than others is increasing (7). Self-presentation and self-objectification on social media, particularly among women, cause serious consequences, such as psychological, physical, and withdrawal from reality (11).

2.1 Self-presentation

Self-presentation as symbolism is defined in multiple terms (1,9,12), facilitating understanding of individuals' interaction with one another when a new personality or behaviour is adopted. It is similar to "the looking glass self" theory to explain and observe self-image while looking in the mirror. The self, made up of "I and me", is conveyed through interaction, an adjustment in personality and adopting a behaviour according to the setting (13).

While explaining self-presentation, the researchers adopt many of the elaborations Goffman gave (1959). His book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" extensively explains self-presentation as a dramaturgical approach. He exemplifies self-presentation with the on-stage performance of characters, who adopt the personality according to the demands of role and situation, referring to individuals as "performers" in their daily lives (8).

Individuals assume a variety of positions on distinct "stages," or "front" and "back," and they employ unique interaction skills and content to facilitate the transition between the two. When they come to the front, they express according to performance demands, which Goffman addressed as "setting" and "personal front" as typical components of "front." "Setting" refers to the scenic portion of expressive equipment, whereas "personal front" refers to the performer's other items that most closely identify with the performer, such as attire, gender, age, appearance, and mannerisms. In summary, self-presentation is any behaviour designed to establish, modify, or preserve an impression of oneself in the minds of others (1).

This way, self-presentation refers to expression, behaviours and personality, mainly attached to physical outlook (14). However, while explaining self-presentation for women, the concept reflects more than physical attributes, personalities or appearances (15). The social media phenomena intensified competition to maintain a desirable and acceptable personality online. As a result, women are more indulged in various techniques to beautify themselves, such as make-up, face surgeries, and filters. Multiple studies have identified women's attempts to hide their true personalities and construct and reconstruct online personas, which shows the inclination of women for self-presentation behaviour. However, this competition and struggle to present online favourably results in negative consequences, such as self-rejection (12).

Females are overly obsessed with appearance presentation (14) and pursue body image, decreasing happiness and satisfaction (14). Since women are more engaged in visual sharing and presentation, these activities construct a new identity and personality according to the virtual context. Most female social media users concentrate on physical appearance and facial features in their visual posts. For example, mainly to obtain the desired personality and present it accordingly, they use makeup filters and edit pictures to look slim. This is why overindulgence in self-objectification causes low satisfaction with body image (16). The available literature demonstrates that worldwide, women are engaged in visual sharing and adopting various methods to re-construct their online personalities; the current research intends to observe and explore the deep online practices of women. The study employed a qualitative research design, and through in-depth interviews, the online visual activities of women are explored, such as posting images and videos opposite to real personalities. Previous studies focus on the impacts of social media on self-esteem, self-presentation and body image satisfaction. However, the current research contributes to evolving literature and discusses the real-life experiences and activities women do online to change themselves. The studies, such as Ward (2018), revealed that women outnumber men in self-presentation and objectification (17).

The study showed that internalising cultural appearance standards positively correlates with body surveillance and body shame. Along with the inner desire, social pressures, societal expectations, and avoiding body shaming further reinforce the willingness to adopt a fake personality (18). However, limited studies have been conducted on such internal cues and external factors that compel women's objectification behaviour. For example, research discussed the increasing self-objectification among women due to social comparison (19). The study highlighted that upward social comparison is increasing at the societal level, accelerating online self-presentation and objectification. Psychologically, young women pay more attention to their outlook, personality and appearances; therefore, they use more editing software and filters, showing the psychological impacts of social comparison. The non-stop visual sharing on social media by showbiz personalities and social media influencers pressuring young women to adopt bodies like them, causing body image dissatisfaction among them (3).

Theories, such as objectification theory, elucidate women's significance within a specific social and cultural framework. A recent study discovered that women who manipulate images before sharing them on social media sites are more prone to self-objectification. This shows their struggle and values attached to physical appearances by adjusting and editing their photos and enhancing their body

image to hide their authentic self (17). Regular use of picture editing software by women may lead to self-comparison with ideal standards and self-objectification, significantly increasing their preoccupation with their beauty (20). Research conducted on Australian female social media users found a positive correlation between altering photos and dissatisfaction with one's physique. Additionally, taking selfies and editing them contributed to greater unhappiness with one's facial appearance among female college students (21).

2.2 Visual sharing and social comparison

Women compare themselves to social media influencers and acquaintances. They get inspiration from their friends and celebrities and emulate certain aspects of their character (22). Furthermore, they also assume a particular identity to portray themselves online. Frequently comparing with others may induce stress in women (23). Moreover, continual comparisons exacerbate women's pessimistic beliefs about their lack of competence and vulnerability (20).

Social media sites may not accurately represent actual life, and users' images and information on these platforms may not reflect reality. For instance, the angle at which a picture is taken might result in a disparity between the perceived height of a person and their actual height. Photo and video editing software increases the likelihood of misleading beauty standards. In reality, individuals are constantly juxtaposed with others in their vicinity. Nevertheless, social media can potentially reduce the geographical gap between individuals. Consequently, individuals can observe the lives of others without the need for direct personal interaction. Social media's propagation of unattainable beauty ideals and lifestyles fosters inadvertent comparisons among individuals. These factors might result in deficiencies and a sense of discontentment among users. Individuals who regularly share and present visual content on the internet are more prone to comparing themselves to others, which may result in experiencing emotions of inadequacy and diminished self-esteem. Jealousy and self-efficacy are essential in mediating and moderating upward social comparison on social media (24).

The study investigated the impact of comparing oneself to others in a positive light inside social networks to uncover the underlying factors that affected participants' emotional states. An empirical study was conducted to build and evaluate a model incorporating upward social comparison as a mediating factor. The study enhanced the comprehension of upward social comparison in social media. It included suggestions for instructing adolescents on using social media appropriately and reducing the negative consequences of social media use. The study posited that the use of social media could give rise to social comparison. A study on self-representation and identity management in social media determined that individuals engaging in maintaining their online presence and comparing with others are participating in a competition within the culture of social media. Individuals possess knowledge about the individuals observing their online platforms, so they deliberately create an ideal self-image based on their desired perception. Exposure to idealised pictures of women on social media platforms is more likely to result in body dissatisfaction, particularly among women. The study indicated that appearance-related activities undertaken by women had a more significant impact on their comparison behaviour on social media platforms than their general behaviour (13). Continuously seeing images of a friend's physical attractiveness greatly intensifies the tendency to compare oneself and diminishes women's happiness towards their bodies (25).

3. METHOD

Aligned with the research purpose, the qualitative approach was adopted, and in-depth interviews were conducted. Since, for qualitative research, the participants must be most relevant and provide "rich information", purposive sampling is the most suitable and reliable to find the most appropriate participants. Additionally, to make sampling more empirical and reliable, a selection criterion was defined, which includes that females must be Chinese and aged between 18 and 25 years.

Additionally, they must have accounts on social media and must be uploading pictures and short videos.

25 Chinese female participants agreed to participate in the study; however, two later declined. Three participants did not complete the interview and left in the middle. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, mainly in Chinese, as participants were not fluent in English. Before the interview, a detailed invitation letter, mentioning the study's objectives and tentative questions, along with a consent form, were sent. The interview questions were focused on three aspects: social media use, the purposes of social media use and how and why they present themselves on social media. Each interview was conducted individually and lasted for 45 minutes to 55 minutes. A mobile audio recorder was used to record the interviews.

After recording, each interview was transcribed and later translated into English. The researchers read the interviews several times to familiarise themselves with the data. Line by line, each interview was analysed, and important information was highlighted. Afterwards, the bracketing technique was used to identify extracts from the interviews related to social media use, online practices and visual engagement. The researchers then coded the extracts and grouped the codes into themes. The extracts with similar meanings and codes were grouped, and recurring themes were identified. The in-depth analysis identified two main themes with few sub-themes.

List of the questions:

1. How long have you been using social media?

2. How many social networking sites are you using?

3. What is the main reason or reasons for using social media?

4. What are the main activities online?

5. Do you upload visual content, like images or videos?

6. What do you prefer, a text-based post or visuals?

7. How many images do you take before uploading on social media?

8. How often do you select and then edit pictures before uploading?

9. Why do you think it is important or need to upload photos or videos online?

10. How do you want to present yourself on social media?

11. What are the similarities and differences between your real life and online personality?

12. Can you explain what type of personality you have online?

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Females' online practices

The respondents were Chinese women between the ages of 18 and 25 who were studying at universities. All the participants shared that they are avid social media users and have been using it for more than ten years. They are daily heavy users, as they are during the rapid development of social media, and they are familiar with and accustomed to using social media. Mainly, they use social media for socialisation and visual sharing. They are also addicted to visual sharing and frequently share pictures, videos and images.

S.No	Initial	Age	Social media use
1	FJ	18	16 years
2	AA	18	10 years
3	GT	25	10 years
4	NG	20	10 years
5	AM	23	8-9 years
6	HN	23	14 years
7	HT	20	11 years
8	QN	21	10 years
9	PR	24	10 years
10	SR	23	11 years

4.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique used to examine and interpret qualitative data. This research analysed the data obtained from semi-structured interviews to discover prevalent repeating themes and concepts among the participants. The method of topic analysis consists of six sequential steps: familiarising, coding, creating, reviewing, defining, identifying, and writing the themes. The research found that Chinese women use social media primarily for visual sharing, including activities such as picture and video uploading and constructing their online identities. Before sharing photographs and videos, individuals choose and modify them and add filters. Moreover, individuals share information about their hobbies, talents, unique qualities, and emotions to shape their desired and distinct persona online. After reading several times, the coding process helped the researchers group the responses into themes. The two main themes that emerged after the interview analysis are "Self-Showcasing" and "Online Identity Obsession."

Table 2: Emergent themes

Serial No	Themes	Codes
1	Self-Showcasing	• Displaying themselves to others • Telling their life and feeling • Upload visual information • Showing skills and habits • Choosing pictures before sharing

2	Online identity Obsession	• Applying make-up and wearing trendy dresses.
		• Selecting images to show best version
		• Identifying diverse angles for pictures
		• Altering personality
		• Editing pictures and applying filters

4.3 Self-showcasing

Prior studies indicate that individuals of different genders may exhibit distinct self-presentation styles, with women displaying greater engagement on social media platforms. They share visual material, such as photographs and videos, to display their behaviour, corresponding to their essential self-expression on social platforms. The interview findings also indicate the consistent patterns seen among Chinese women. As Chinese society has developed with the advent of social media, women now have the liberty to showcase their skills and attractiveness.

The study participants consistently expressed their fondness for uploading visual content, such as photographs and videos, on social networking platforms. The participants' frequency of uploading photographs and videos was unexpectedly high, surpassing expectations. This might be attributed to the fact that the interviewers were students who often had more leisure time. Regularly posting images on the Internet may be seen as a self-presentation, indicating women's inclination to exhibit and display themselves continuously (14).

Emphasising the frequency of uploads highlights the pressing need to establish an online persona. Several individuals noted a decline in their inclination to submit visual material, such as photographs and films, as they age. The decrease in motivation implies that individuals are undergoing a process of self-definition via posting content, reducing their desire to upload visual pictures as often as they did during their early engagement with social media. The presence of visual pictures in submitted postings is inseparable, indicating the essential role of visual image performance in expressing one's identity.

Furthermore, participants acknowledged that they chose photographs and video clips before sharing visual data. Two individuals indicated their preference for uploading and editing movies in addition to images. One person was motivated to consistently highlight the positive and aesthetically pleasing aspects, while other participants shared a similar rationale. One participant noted that taking many images and selecting the best one afterwards "reduces the likelihood of errors". The participants agreed on one element that explained why the selection process yielded pretty pleasing photographs.

4.4 Online identity obsession

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants are avid social media users and engage in visual sharing to exhibit themselves. As women, the participants also demonstrated their inclination towards self-expression. However, the interview analysis revealed that this yearning has transformed into an all-consuming fixation. The participants reported creating very few posts or updating their status using written words. All information is sent visually, such as photographs, pictures, check-ins, and emojis to provide a reaction. Despite its rapid rise in popularity, social media has fostered a fixation among users on self-presentation and projecting an identity or personality that diverges from their true selves. For instance, every participant unanimously agreed that it was necessary to apply cosmetics before having their pictures taken. If they do, they only capture photographs after using a beauty filter. There are other presumed motivations for wearing makeup,

such as adhering to fashion trends, seeking individuality, and aiming to seem distinct from others. The participants reached a consensus that they edited images and videos for three primary motives. One primary purpose is to enhance the visual appeal of the shot by modifying the tone, lighting, angle, and sharpness. The second objective is to improve the visual aspect by altering the physique, complexion, and facial characteristics.

According to McKinley and Hyde (1996), women use a third-person viewpoint to assess their physical appearance (26). The manipulation of visual elements in photographs and videos reinforces women's fixation on attaining an idealised body image. Participants are very acquainted with editing applications, and one said, "*The first thing I change is skin colour. I may choose the filter that will make my face whiter.*" Another one said that she would edit these irrelevant faces. "*My face will be smaller, my forehead will be smaller, my nose will be straighter and taller*". These behaviours show women's obsession with their looks and personality. Fardouly and

Holland (2018) determined that the act of retouching photos might intensify the worries and preoccupation of young women with body image problems (17). Boursier (2020) described that women who habitually use photo editing software may compare themselves to ideal standards and objectify themselves (20).

One of the participants mentioned that "just editing it (the photo) every time... and then everybody thinks you look like this in this picture, and then they forget what you look like in reality, and then I get that feeling too, that there is a person who edits the same thing every time, I automatically think she looks like that, even if she does not look like that." The fourth is to compete with others. Luo (2018) believes that comparison magnifies women's insecurity. Reer et al. (2019) also pointed out that comparing the mind will reduce physical fullness (25). In particular, Cohen et al. (2018) pointed out that women are more likely to be dissatisfied with their appearance when exposed to the ideal image on social media. Hong et al. (2020) found that women tend to impress others in the context of their personality. The interview analysis indicated that the participants were obsessed with uploading visuals, editing, and crafting to show their best version.

5. CONCLUSION

Participants elucidated the several motivations behind their use of social media, including interpersonal communication, social interaction, relationship management, self-disclosure, friendship formation, and staying up with current trends. The ambitions and requirements of individuals are evident in their motives for using social media. This supports Freud's need theory (1916), which describes women wanting to be recognised(27). This stresses the integral role of social media in women's lives and the fact that women use this platform for their recognition.

The activities and practices of women showing themselves via visual pictures on social media align with earlier studies indicating that self-disclosure may boost self-esteem and that social media facilitates connections, interactions, and self-presentation among young individuals. Moreover, precisely, women portray themselves as more aesthetically pleasing, aiming for a slimmer and fairer appearance and altering their facial characteristics in photographs. Regarding the present study's purpose, participants expressed their views of their online identities, and all affirmed that their social media identities would not be similar to their actual ones. Their tales emphasise the varying perceptions of online behaviours and identities among individuals with distinct personalities. On the one hand, they all manipulate images to present their favourable aspects on social media sites. Each exhibits discerning behaviour while uploading photographs or videos. Participants reported that online identities hindered their ability to engage with others or their online identities encouraged them to be more actively involved in online interactions.

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