Chapter 18

"Hey, Look at My Body!":
An Exploratory Study of Body Display on Facebook Among Hong Kong Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the phenomenon of online body display by users of social networking sites in Hong Kong. A survey of 392 young adults was conducted to investigate the relationships between narcissism, grandiose exhibitionism, body image satisfaction, perceived privacy risks, and online body display. A Body Display Index was developed to measure the perceived level of sexual explicitness of photographs shared by Facebook users. Grandiose exhibitionism, a sub-trait of narcissism, was found to be a stronger predictor of online body display than narcissism. The relationship between body image satisfaction and online body display was not significant, and no relationship was found between such displays and perceived privacy risks, thus implying a lack of social media-related privacy concerns among the respondents.

INTRODUCTION

Since its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong has maintained a diversified media system (Hong Kong Special Administration Region Government, 2013). According to Internet World Stats (2013), Hong Kong's Facebook penetration rate at the end of 2012 was 56.4%, compared to a world average of just 14.4%. A study conducted by Socialbreaker (2014), an online market intelligence company, found that the 25-34 age group accounts for the largest proportion (approximately 34%) of Facebook users in Hong Kong, followed by the 18-24 age group (around 22%). In an online survey hosted by BlogHer and the Nielsen Company in 2011, 92% of the 387 Hong Kong respondents reported using Facebook on a weekly basis (BlogHer, 2011).

Photographs are among the most predominant types of content on Facebook, with users posting an estimated 30 billion photos per year (Savage, 2011). This enormous library of images has attracted considerable attention from scholars and industry practitioners alike (see e.g., Carpenter, 2012; Chen, & Cai, 2012; Hum et al., 2011; Wu, O'Brien-Strain, Messenlehner, & Tretter, 2011). Also, the issue of "selfies"—photos that people take of themselves—has been a topic of interest in the press since 2013. A nationwide representative survey of 2,005 U.K. adults performed by a private research company found that 51% had taken a selfie in the past, with 41% of the 18- to 24-year-old respondents admitting to having taken "sexy selfies" ("Half of the UK," 2013). The same survey discovered Facebook to be the most popular channel for sharing selfies. One commentator suggested, "the rise of the selfie is a perfect metaphor for our increasingly narcissistic culture. We're desperately crying out: Look at me!" ("What did Narcissus," 2013).

This article considers the phenomenon of online body display among users on social networking sites in Hong Kong, and investigates how Hong Kong Facebook users construct their identities through online body display on this popular social networking site. More specifically, the analysis examines the relationship between narcissism, grandiose exhibitionism, body image satisfaction, perceived privacy risks, and online body display among young adults posting photos to Facebook.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Body Display

Online body display refers to exposing one's body image in an online public space where it can be freely accessed. One way of exposing one's body in an online environment is to share photos and post them on social media sites, while another one is through sexting.[1]

The research related to online body display takes two major approaches. The first approach stems from the work of Goffman (1959) and views photos through the construction of one's self lens. Although computer-mediated communication (CMC) generally contains fewer non-verbal cues than face-to-face communication, people easily adapt to CMC and use it to develop relationships with others, a phenomenon captured by Walther's (1992) social information processing theory (SIP). According to this theory, Facebook users construct their desired image through the photos they post. Moreover, in CMC, users "may construct messages that portray themselves in preferential ways, emphasizing desirable characteristics and communicating in a manner that invites preferential reactions" (Walther, 2011, p. 461).

Hum et al. (2011) found that Facebook users actively construct their identities by carefully selecting and posting photos. The analysis suggested that profile pictures on Facebook tended to include the Facebook user alone, and were inactive, posed, and appropriate for all audiences. Rose et al. (2012) identified gender differences in Facebook photo postings. Other researchers (Lee, 2012; Ridout, Campbell, & Ellis, 2012) demonstrated that the photos on social networking sites operated as tools to establish racial identity among African American college students and for university students to associate themselves with socially desirable behavior.

Siibak (2010) investigated how young men constructed different versions of masculinity. The term "body display" was used to refer to "a man … wearing revealing or hardly any clothes (shirts unbuttoned, underwear; swimming trunks, shorts; towels around the bodies, etc.) or no clothes at all (no shirts on,

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