

Chapter 22

Networked Collective Symbolic Capital Revisited: Selfies Sharing and Identity Negotiation Among Taiwanese Gay Men

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to illustrate identity performance via the display of symbolic capital by Taiwanese gay men through photo-sharing experiences on Instagram. For Taiwanese gay men, photo-sharing experiences on Instagram have become a significant venue where they can interact with selected publics through performing various personae. This study has classified roles with various forms of cultural capital as well as clarifying how distinction is meticulously maneuvered among collapsed contexts. Through ethnographic interviews with 17 gay male college students from Taiwan and textual analysis of their correspondence through texting on Instagram, this study first contextualizes how the interactional processes engaged in on Instagram help constitute a collective identity pertaining to Taiwanese gay men on Instagram. The photo-sharing experiences are examined as an identity-making process involving the display of various symbolic capital, illuminating the calculated performance of taste and the collective past oppressed by the heteronormative society. The conclusion offers an alternative sociological intervention that goes beyond the notion of digital narcissism to help understand how the cultural capital on the presumption of photo-sharing experiences is invested.

PHOTO-SHARING ADDICTED QUEEN?

The quickest way to differentiate a gay man from the straight ones is to look at the number of photo-sharing experiences he takes on his smartphone. (Informant 17)

Gay men derive pride and prejudice from the comments left on their public photo-sharing experiences...so go and check them out if you really want to understand the identity and virtual community. (Informant 13)

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Networked Collective Symbolic Capital Revisited

The above two comments were drawn from a casual discussion that took place within a LGBTQ society for undergraduate students under my supervision toward the end of the spring semester of 2016. All male members of the society self-identify as gay youth, including the advisor — also the author of this research. While everyone with a camera phone has taken photo-sharing experiences at some time, I was amazed by the number of photographs shared with me, all spontaneously retrieved from the smartphones of participants. Most of the photographs — probably thousands — had never been uploaded to social media, and the disclosure of these “private photo-sharing experiences” provided me with an eye-opening encountering on the wide ranges of the symbolic repertoires of the individuals taking them, and the subtle negotiation involved as the individuals present themselves for future reference. I was caught up with the relentless cultural labor involved in promoting and sustaining their networked personae, some of which is experimentally not flattering, such as a number of pictures featuring a himself standing in the mud, or crying outside in the rain — an unflattering imitation of scenes from *Crystal Boy* — a local literature masterpiece. A naïve reader may find these photo-sharing experiences self-indulgent and repetitive, but as an advisor to the gay student club, this experience inspired me to come up with a thought-provoking research proposition — why are these vernacular life practices, daunting but nevertheless entertaining, so prominent among them? What are they trying to achieve with these vernacular practices? While my discussion with students can be anecdotal, the cultural and aesthetic investment in producing symbolic repertoire seems tacitly shared across the gay community, and only selected few photographs are shared on social media. This study thus is driven by a desire to unpack an increasingly common vernacular practice among Taiwanese gay male college students, which is common yet under-researched.

With the introduction of affordable smartphones capable of photography and their seamless integration with networked mobile communication, scholars have recognized the taking of photo-sharing experiences as a ubiquitous and vernacular everyday activity (e.g. Autenrieth, 2011; Hand, 2012; Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008). Once taken, photo-sharing experiences can easily be retrieved and uploaded to social media. The researcher is particularly interested in Instagram, an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social networking service. Similar to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr, Instagram is chosen as a focus because of its prominence compared to other social networking platforms. First, millennials are quitting Facebook, previously Taiwan’s most popular social networking website. Many informants complain that Facebook now contains so many targeted ads and shared articles that little room is left for real socializing. In Taiwan, much as in the US, millennials also complain that Facebook has become a network dominated by weak-ties, as well as a soapbox for older “politically-charged grown-ups” to promote political agendas and alleviate frustrations (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). The informants of this study thus favored Instagram for sharing photo-sharing experiences, and represented themselves through photo-sharing experiences uploaded to their profiles, choosing different kinds of pictures for uploading to each platform. Notably, informants seeking sexual opportunities sometimes upload pictures that can be considered sensual (e.g., pictures in which they are wearing shorts or revealing clothes). These “sexy photo-sharing experiences,” which emphasize the body and face in aesthetically pleasing and demonstrative ways, are prevalent on Instagram among users from the Taiwanese gay community. This trend can be more evidentially substantiated by the increased number of posts among Taiwanese gay micro-celebrities and followers. However, Instagram has not been considered or studied as a hook-up site for gay men (Lang, 2015). Given the tacit potential of sociality and hookup, identity negotiation among gay men on Instagram are more challenging than other well-defined platforms. Although Instagram is not designed exclusively for the pursuit of sexual opportunities, it affords millennials a place to mingle with friends and explore various opportunities. The attractive feature of Instagram as a hookup site is

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