Constructing Students' Identities through Social Media: A Case Study of Chinese Mainland Students in Macao

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Abstract

The role of social media in young generation's live become more salient nowadays, especially for them to searching for relationships and maintaining social connections. In the particular life transitions, social media provide adolescents amounts of resources to help them construct their new identities and cope with culture issues. In this study, I employ social comparison theory to explore how do Chinese mainland students in Macao use social media to manage their online and offline identities in different phases of college life. The research reveals that respondents experience affirmation, acculturation and integration from their past "Freshman" period to the present "Junior" period. Besides, social comparison plays a mainly negative role in handling students' identities, which leads a series of difficulties and worries in their college life.

Keywords: social media; mainland Chinese students in Macao; identities

Introduction

Social media plays an important role in teenage social life, especially for self-presentation, maintaining new relationships and constructing their identities in digital world (Boyd, 2007). A growing body of work has investigated digital identity of people at different life transitions (Orzech, Moncur, Durrant, & Trujillo-Pisanty, 2016), and how do university students use social media resources to help them adapt into new environment (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012). However, little is known about what particular themes or patterns related to the usage of social media in different stages of college life for young adults, as well as how does social comparison affect their process of formation or construction of social identities. This study aims to fill the gap of previous research.

This paper targets at Chinese mainland third-year students in Macao, trying to explore the role played by social media in different stages of their college life. I compared with related work concerning with how do expatriates and immigrants cope with acculturation issues when they enter into the new community (Mao & Shen, 2015), and the structure of this paper is as followed: I first employ the literature on social media social comparison and identity work, then I adopt the semi-structured interview to interpret the usage of social media in students' college life. The final section discusses the empirical results and conclusion. Based on the theoretical framework of social comparison theory and identity work of mainland Chinese students in Macao, the following questions are proposed to inform the study:

-- How do mainland Chinese students in Macao use social media in different stages of college life to construct their identities?

-- How do mainland Chinese students in Macao manage and balance their online and offline identities in social comparison processes?

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

Since there has a growing number of studies explored the usage of social media technologies by young adults and their online participation nowadays, social comparison on social network has attracted great attention in recent years. Even though social media provide more chances for young generations to present themselves through various of ways, such as share their photos, a range of anxieties may also be brought in the processes of social comparison. As one of the necessary components in college life, the knowledge of social comparison and identity work are explored further below.

Social Comparison theory

Social comparison theory was first proposed by Festinger (1954), which posits that people have an innate desire to evaluate themselves through comparing to others. This process reflects that people often compare themselves with those who share similar characteristics with them to achieve accurate and stable evaluations, which involves two types of social comparison: ability and opinion. The nature of social comparison of ability is competitive in terms of performance and achievement comparison. In contrast, the goal of social comparison focuses on constructing one's own values, attitudes and behaviors, etc. (Suls et al. 2000), regarding comparison targets as role models (Park & Baek, 2018).

The processes of social comparison can either boost the confidence and self-image, or hurt the self-esteem, which can be achieved by downward comparison and upward comparison. The downward comparison refers to compare favorably to someone who is less than or inferior to them aiming at establishing positive effect, while the upward comparison is defined as comparing themselves to others who is better or superior to them, which set themselves into a low status and threaten the self-esteem (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). The processes of social comparison have an impact on social connectedness, which is an important feature in social identity formation (Shafie et al, 2012).

Social Comparison Processes and Social Media

The popularity of social networking sites in the digital age allows users to easily share their life updates and construct the online identities, which provides a unique context and rich opportunities for social comparisons. However, most of the users tend to create a "desired self" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) through selective self-presentation, which leads more upward comparison performed on social media platforms. According to Goffman (1959), each person adopts behaviors of front stage as well as backstage in order to display a good image and perform "ideal self" in front of the audiences. For example, as a common and new tool for self-presentation, selfie posting is popular on social networking sites, especially for young generations. The standards of beauty are gradually constructed through self-presentation and peer comparison when a person posts selfie desiring at expectation and preferences of others (Chua & Chang 2016). In the specific context of college students in Macao, selfie postings on social media platforms can be testified on how social comparison influence the construction of their identities, which manifests a desire towards claiming membership of a specific group and community.

Social pressure can also be brought in through self-presentation and then causes the risk of damaging self-esteem (Pounders, Kowalczyk, & Stowers, 2016) and identity clarity, which are important dimension of identity development. Campbell et al. (1996) argues that self-esteem regards the evaluation of one's identity and self-value, while identity clarity concerns the coordination of different senses of identity, such as beliefs and purposes. As an important stage in life transitions, university gives particular salience to self-esteem and identity clarity that may get influenced by social comparison of ability as well as opinion when accessing social media platforms. This position suggests that the identity formation and development of Chinese mainland students in Macao would affected by different types of social comparison online, which then brings particular salience on social norms and rules of interaction.

Social Media Social Comparison and Identity Work

There has been a rapidly growing body of research on how young adults form or reflect their online identities on social media. However, most of the studies employ Facebook which is a popular and widely used social network as dominate platform (Yang & Brown, 2013), while other sites like WhatsApp and WeChat that also attract more attention in international context remain largely unexamined. Therefore, this study aims at exploring how university students in Macao construct their identities through WeChat platform, which plays a more vital role in online communication globally nowadays.

Since social comparison on social media platforms drew a special attention increasingly, little is known that the implication of it for identity development on youth (Yang et al., 2018). Drawing on the theory of social comparison, this research targets at Macao college students who use WeChat as dominate platform, aiming to shed light on the gap of how different types of social comparison on social media influence identity variables, including self-esteem and identity clarity. Meanwhile, many studies fail to explore fully how to adapt and balance the relationship between online identity and offline identity of college students, which is also be filled through this investigation.

Methodology

Participants

I recruited 13 university students (aged around 21) who study in Macao University and Science and Technology or City University of Macao. All of the participants are junior students from Chinese Mainland who use social media platforms a lot. Among all of the respondents, eight females and five males of them took part.

Procedure

In order to understand the different stages of college life, the participants were firstly required to reminisce their experience involving the usage of WeChat in the past three years, especially for their "identity work" in the period of Freshman, Sophomore as well as Junior. I then further proposed a few of questions in terms of their attitudes and psychological states towards social media platforms to encourage them to think retrospectively of the WeChat Moments that they posted. The subsequent extracts from the answers of the interviewees helped me comprehend their former experiences of commencing college at the very beginning, gradually getting familiar with the new community, as well as the confusion and difficulties in the process of social comparison on social media for the construction of their identities. Besides, pseudonyms in the following sections were used to protect the privacy of the participants with informed consent from them.

Measure

All interviews transcripts were first recorded and transcribed, and subsequently organized into different categories and a thematic analysis was conducted through selective coding. According to Braun and Clarke's (2006), thematic analysis is a fundamental method for qualitative analysis and six phases analysis are supposed to follow. The first and foremost of conducting thematic analysis is to immerse yourself into familiarizing the data and write down the initial ideas and comments. This initial coded data will be produced through comparison among different features and potential patterns of the data, which allows us to search for key themes and refine the specifics of each of them. Selection of attractive extract examples is the final stage of doing thematic analysis and subsequently the findings are prepared for writing down. This analysis focuses on how mainland students in Macao construct their online identities via social media, in particular the role of WeChat to enhance their social comparison. The key findings below focus on the following practices, including affirmation, acculturation and integration.

Data Analysis

The analysis showed a number of different ways in which students from Chinese mainland used WeChat Moments during their study in Macao, and more crucially, revealed that how online and offline identities constructed and interacted in the processes of social comparison. Firstly, the findings explored how students express and connect their preestablished identities to retain a tradition from home in a brand-new environment through social media, especially for expecting the affirmation from their parents and old friends. Secondly, the findings reveal that how students use social media in the process of assimilation to the new community and acculturation into the new environment, establishing and constructing a new "university" identity at the same time. Finally, the obstacles of using social media for international students in the process of the integration to manage their identities into new context are also be revealed. The findings under these different subheadings are as follows.

Affirmation- "hometown" identity supported from family and friends

I found that almost all participants used social media to express their feeling towards people and things in their hometown publicly, which indicates the important role of social media in strengthening students' preestablished identities related to the family and friends. It was necessary for them to keep the relationships being left behind intact when they were studying in Macao:

Me and my friends from high schools still keep in touch after I going to university. I often post group photos with them on my WeChat Moments for celebration and memorization, especially

when I back to my hometown in summer and winter holidays, I have more time to hang out with them and take photos with them. Whenever I miss them in my college, I am able to scroll down my Moments to check the photos and reminisce a bit. (Lin)

Apart from the topic of friendship the extract showed above, it is common for mainland students feel homesick and nostalgic triggered by cultural differences like food:

I think sometimes I feel nostalgic when I am in Macao. I remember I used to post a photo of a meal that I made on Moments, which called Laba rice porridge. This is a kind of traditional food of Laba Festival in my hometown. I missed my family on that day, so I cooked this by myself because I still remembered the feeling when my mom cooked it for me at home. (Lee)

Even though almost all the students agreed that digital technology was important to keep in touch and comfort them, there was still one male participant who hoped to adapt into new environment as much as possible concerning of social comparison and pay more attention on the college life:

I mainly focus on my college friends when I got into uni, so I seldom post the photos with my high school students on WeChat Moments. To be frank, I want to show up my new friends. (Rob)

Acculturation & Assimilation- "university" identity construction

I believed that many participants regarded social media as a platform for them to make early comparisons. It is evident that most of the students tend to make themselves look good on the social media in order to establish a "perfect university identity". They admitted that it's necessary for them to "edit" and "polish" the posts because they acknowledged the crucial role of self-presentation in the digital world (Chua & Chang 2016):

I spent much time to edit everything I posted on WeChat Moments, no matter the pictures of food or my selfies. I think it's important for me to carefully pick up the selfies, like deleting all my ugly photos and choosing the ones I look pretty and editing them. The main reason I did something like that because I wanted to leave a good impression to others, especially for the people we barely meet and just known each other online, including some college friends. It's obvious that my photos posted online is the only way for them to make a judgement and know about me, so it's worth for me to spend lots of time on the social media. (Lin)

I quite care about what people think about me, so I make sure every Moment I post shows the best side of me...I dislike someone who complains everything on the Moment all the time, people won't be interested about what you complain about, they just want to see the positive side of you. (Wong)

Even though social media was seen as an important platform for self-management and self-presentation in the process of adjustment and assimilation, some of our participants expressed their worry and concern towards online friendship:

I don't wish that I know about someone through WeChat Moments, because social media is so 'fake' and maybe not the best ideal platform for knowing people. I much preferred in making friends face-to-face, which is more genuine and realistic. (Xu)

For the international students, especially for the mainland students in Macao context, it's challenging for them to face communication barriers because people from different regions with various accents and dialects. It's a considerable issue for them to balance their old identities and a new one when it comes to self-expression. Some respondents claimed that they would avoid to post words on WeChat Moments that can only be understood by their hometown friends, in case that the college students from other provinces would feel confused:

I will consider the feelings of all my classmates in the university, because they may don't understand what I post when I put jokes or cross-talk related to my dialect [Hunan dialect] on the WeChat Moments. I think if you want to integrate into a new community, it's necessary to step out of your comfort zone and change into a more acceptable persona. (Rob)

Some of the students even learn or affected by the various languages in Macao in the process of acculturation into college life, which aims to demonstrate and construct new identities who study in Macao via social media:

I am fond of learning Cantonese and I love this kind of language, so sometimes I post WeChat Moments or Weibo in Traditional Chinese and use the expression of Cantonese. Apart from that, I also tried to post in English instead of my native language. I think maybe I gradually influenced by multilingual cultural environment of Macao since I got into college. (Zhang)

Integration - difficulties in the process of online and offline identities construction

Most students acknowledged social media was useful and convenience engaging in construction of new identity, but it has plenty of evidences that they also worried about the negative consequences of online social comparison. One obvious one was "wrapping up" yourself and pretend to be "happy":

Sometimes I posted groups photos of club activities on WeChat Moments, but that didn't indicate I was enjoy with them. Actually, I just wanted to show that I was integrated and fit into the new community and pretended I was having fun. (Sun)

In light of the theory of upward social comparison on social media, it's also notable to see that some of the participants feared of posting the true feelings online. Consequently, social pressure can be brought in and the risks of self-esteem can be increased. A quote below will illustrate this point:

I'm good at hiding my feelings on social media. I never posted some WeChat Moments to complain something or expressed my true feelings even though I encountered some problems and felt depressed and emotional. I just wish I can have the "likes" from others instead of sympathy... (Liu)

Interestingly, some students also use other social media for posting and self-expression, which they believe these platforms offered great opportunities to open their minds:

I tend to post my true feelings or some nonsense on social media, like Weibo, Instagram, because few of people know me and I don't wish my parents worry about me when I put these on WeChat Moments. (Lee)

Final Discussion

In this study, I focused on two dimensions that how social media played a crucial role for the international students in the social comparison process. Firstly, I demonstrated the main types of identities of participants in different period of college life. Secondly, my study also explored how Chinese mainland students managed and balanced their online identities as well as offline identities in the context of Macao. Based on the thematic analysis

of the collected data, I summarized the three different stages of identity construction for students from their past "Freshman" period to the present "Junior" period, which includes affirmation, acculturation and integration. These phases of identity processes have been discussed in numerous research paper concerning with that people cross different cultures into a brand-new environment, as in the example of the undergraduates' transitions into college (Julienne, David & Susan, 2016) and transitional migrants living abroad (Lingel et al., 2014). The following section will examine how social comparison plays out across the three stages of the college life for Chinese mainland students studying Macao according to the related work in detail.

Firstly, the study draws out that the students showed their worries and encountered some difficulties in the process of retaining their preestablished identities and creating the new identities at the same time. In the previous research, the formation of an online persona, including sharing selective ideas and beliefs online as well as the construction of digital identity, has become one of the major concerns revealed by young adults (Orzech et al., 2016). In the stage of assimilation and acculturation for the participants' sophomore year, the usage of visual impression management had a strong role to play for shaping the online identities of students, which encouraged them to tailor and edit their photos before they post them on WeChat Moment in order to present an "ideal self" in the digital world. Goffman's work articulates that the 'performers' restrain their authentic behaviour as well as attitudes and take advantage of self-presentation in the complex social transitions of life, which may cause some troubles when they face the intersection of different identities (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). It can be clearly concluded that the respondents were more likely to pay much attention on their acculturation into the new community when they were in a dilemma of whether holding back and affirming their "home" identity or embracing their novel "university" identity.

Another aspect that could emerge from my research was that social comparison processes are mainly fraught and negative concerning with the students' online and offline identities management issues in their past college life. When the international students in Macao seeking to integrate with the new environment and culture, it's inevitable for them to "polish" their profiles and selfies on social media aiming to "look better" to outsiders and audiences, which was usually accompanied by a set of anxieties, such as peer pressure and the risks of self-esteem. Furthermore, these following anxieties are no longer only existing in the offline communication when people are exposed more about their "authentic self", but also can be reflected on the internet in terms of the self-presentation issue (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016). From my research, I believe that whether the college need to pay more attention and offer more help to the students' online identity work, especially for their freshmen years at the traditional time, can be seen as a considerable question in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has illustrated how Chinese mainland students used social media to construct and manage their different identities when studied in Macao. The results revealed that social comparison played a mainly negative role in tackling students' online and offline identities, which leaded a series of difficulties and worries in different stages of the college life, especially for the issues of self-esteem and peer pressure. The findings of this study have the similarity concerning with the usage of social media by young adults in the process of transition with the research conducted in UK institutions (Thomas et al. 2017). These results suggest that there are still some problems for young people to balance their online and offline identities and thus further effective knowledge as well as psychological guidance may need to be provided and conducted on campus more widely.

I recognize this study has some limitations and also spaces for future investigation. The participants in this research could only answer the questions that related to their experience in Freshmen and Sophomore period by reminiscing their past college life and refreshing the memory out of the time limited and restricted resources at the current stage. The ideal study could be tracing and recording a specific group of students for four years of their whole college life in the future. Further, the role of social media in the important transition for young adults proceeding into the society and getting on work can also be explored in the next stage of my research.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Statements and Declarations

Statements and Declarations
No funding was received for conducting this study. The present study has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Publisher's Note

Author Contributions

Not applicable.

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