


Shameful Secrets and Self-Presentation: Negotiating Privacy Practices Among Youth and Rural Women in China

SAGE Open
January-March 2020: 1–12
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244020903396
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


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Abstract

China, like the United States, has no defined concept of privacy in its Constitution and Chinese citizens have to work out how to negotiate their presence online, just as others elsewhere do. Online privacy in China has not received strong legislative protection compared with the U.S. and European countries as privacy has never written as an individual right in China's Constitution, nor in the Civil Law. Chinese privacy perceptions and everyday privacy practices in social media have not been fully examined. This article presents an original, ethnographic study of how 26 Chinese youth, men and women, and 25 older rural women from Changsha, south-central China are negotiating what counts as privacy online in their everyday practices. It finds out that youth group in Changsha has a stronger understanding of the technical level of deployment of the social media technologies, enacting both positive and protective self-presentation instantiated by “human flesh search,” “public online privacy,” and “improved firewall.” However, the notion of shameful secrets touches on the protection of the reputation of those concerned, and social relationships play an important role in privacy boundary negotiation, common to both groups. This demonstrates that sociocultural contexts need to be taken into consideration and should be more nuancedly examined when studying online privacy and working out privacy protection methods.

Keywords

privacy, self-presentation, social media, Chinese, *WeChat*

Introduction

Stuff that I've shared publicly in social media is under my screening. This belongs to my online privacy. But I am willing to make it public. For example, my name, my contacts, aren't these privacy? Some people are not willing to [disclose their] mobile phone number; it is indeed quite annoying when others send me harassing messages. But to me, I don't care that much. Instead, it is those things that disgrace you . . . I don't want people to know anything about my defeat . . . Online privacy does not represent unwilling . . . for example, this is my privacy, but it doesn't mean I don't want to share it. (Xiaolei, participant)¹

Twenty-two-year-old Xiaolei made this comment while talking about his thoughts on privacy in social media. For Xiaolei, privacy has no unified definition or clear boundary. It can be information about his digital identity or it can be shameful secrets that would disgrace him if disclosed. Chinese citizens have to work out how to negotiate their presence online, just as others elsewhere do. This is not surprising because earlier generations did not have to deal with big data about themselves and the speed by which private data can be shared. China, like the United States, has no defined concept of privacy in its Constitution. Online privacy in China has not

received strong legislative protection compared with the U.S. and European countries because privacy has never been written as an individual right in China's Constitution, nor in the Civil Law (Kennedy & Zhang, 2017; Wu et al., 2011).

At the individual level, online privacy practices become more contextual with the prevalence of social media, interwoven with factors such as technical infrastructures, audience dynamics (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011), and social norms (Vickery, 2014). It is therefore of great significance to look at individual online privacy practices in a more nuanced way, situating them in networked contexts, which Marwick and Boyd (2014) illustrate as “networked privacy” (p. 1052). In this way, online privacy protection can be enhanced.

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However, current privacy literature rarely reflects upon the diverse Chinese networked contexts. Chinese perceptions of privacy and everyday privacy practices in social media have not been fully examined. In China, the most popular social media platform, *WeChat*, reached 1 billion monthly active users by the end of 2017 (Tencent, 2018). Although the majority of *WeChat* users (86.2%) are young people between 18 and 35 years, there are prominently 10.9% of older people (Tencent & CAICT, 2015). As the United States has welcomed a growth of older social media users (Madden, 2010), China is also seeing a similar change in recent years (Kantar, 2016). Nevertheless, most online privacy research focuses on young generations. How older social media users make sense of online privacy and how their perceptions of online privacy influence their online behavior remain unexplored. This article, based on an ethnographic study in a city in south-central China, looks at the social media use of not only younger Chinese university students but also Chinese older rural women. Due to the divergent social and technological contexts in which these two groups are situated, this article provides a sound comparative perspective of Chinese online privacy perceptions and practices. It explores how these two cohorts make sense of online privacy on their own terms during various social media practices and demonstrates how shameful secrets and positive self-presentation play out in their negotiation of privacy boundaries.

Literature Review

Online Privacy in China

Historically, privacy in China means shameful secrets that individuals do not want to disclose. The English word “privacy” is represented by two Chinese words: *yin* (隱) and *si* (私). *Si* covers both “private” and “privacy” (McDougall, 2001). *Yin* denotes to “hide from view” and, as H. Wang (2011, p. 34) points out, carries a “derogatory sense” and implications of “illegitimate sexual relationship.” In the traditional sense, many Chinese think of shame when they talk about *yin si*. When they say they do not disclose *yin si*, they mean they do not disclose matters that are concerned with shame that would cost their face (H. Wang, 2011).

The modern conceptualization of online privacy in China developed on the established Western idea of “privacy” (Burgoon, 1982; DeCew, 1997; Warren & Brandeis, 1890; Westin, 1967). At the end of the 20th century, the concept of online privacy officially entered Chinese public discourse when the Chinese government published a series of regulations to protect the security of computer information networks (Wu et al., 2011). Following Westin’s (1967) conception of privacy, Yang and Liu (2013) conceived online privacy as “the legitimate claim of Chinese individuals, groups, or institutions to determine when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others on

the Internet” (p. 43). Wu et al. (2011) argue that information privacy has become a principle concern when digital technologies made personal information much easier to access and circulate. That ease and access can be in private locations, such as a personal diary in a computer file; private relationships, such as an email to a pharmacy; and private activities, such as using credit histories (Moor, 1997). Moreover, “the situations which are normatively private can vary significantly from culture to culture, place to place” (Moor, 1997, p. 30). This is called the *restricted access view* of privacy. It is simply not possible to control all the information about ourselves online, although it might be desirable. The objective in a restricted access view of digitized information is about ensuring that the right people have access to our information at the right time (Moor, 1997).

A *control view* of privacy, alternatively, considers that it is possible to define privacy clearly and for individuals to control most, if not all, information about them. From the perspectives of Wu et al. (2011), as well as many other scholars (Hu & Gu, 2016; Stanaland & Lwin, 2013; Yang & Liu, 2013), for example, online privacy is algorithm based, related to different types of online personal data that can be accessed, collected, and used for certain motives. These researchers contend that the boundary between the private and the public can be clearly defined, which is “to seek the essence of privacy in abstraction, to debate a priori conditions for privacy, and to search for rigid conceptual boundaries at the expense of rich and embedded privacy practices” (E. J. Yuan et al., 2013, p. 1012).

To date, there have been few studies that look at the “rich and embedded privacy practices” in China. E. J. Yuan et al. (2013), analyzing privacy discourse on *Weibo*, concluded that privacy notions on *Weibo* are associated with broader Chinese sociotechnical contexts, including norms in social roles and personal relationships, and political traditions in China. Privacy for E. J. Yuan, et al. (2013) is taken to be a social construct of how individuals negotiate the relationship between themselves as an individual and as a member of the social collectivities to which they belong, close to a restricted access view of privacy. Recent empirical studies focus on quantitative methods like survey questionnaires (Xue et al., 2016; H. Yuan & Hou, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017). In addition, most studies use university students as sample populations, neglecting other groups of social media users. The quantitative studies also tend to focus on one single social media platform without considering the complex dynamics of privacy perceptions and practices across multiple platforms. They tend to reach a consensus that Chinese youth disclose most of their personal information on *QQ*, *WeChat*, or *Weibo* but remain very concerned about their online privacy, fitting the notion of a “privacy paradox” where control of private information is surrendered even when people do not wish to surrender that control (Barnes, 2006). They also suggest that psychological benefits such as personal pleasure and identification, social benefits such as relationship maintenance and

social capital, economic benefits like money rewards and personalized service are possible stimulators for self-disclosure. Yet, there remains scarce empirical evidence showing how these factors influence individual online practices. They fail to uncover how individuals understand privacy on their own terms based on their everyday social media practices and the complicated relationships between privacy perceptions and privacy acts. This article therefore argues that the “privacy contexts” need to be more nuanced and variegated with more attention paid to different cohorts of people and various social media platforms. Methods like ethnography give voice to the people and can offer a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the local and wider social contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Applying ethnography to studying online privacy in China will contribute to a more thorough understanding of privacy contexts.

Online Privacy and Self-Presentation

Current literature has indicated that self-presentation plays a very important role in individual privacy practices (Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011). Goffman (1959) proposes that an individual tends to either consciously or unconsciously present themselves by conveying the impression that others might make of them in a face-to-face setting. Impression management and self-presentation are usually discussed together and used interchangeably (Kramer & Haferkamp, 2011). Scholars have also extensively studied self-presentation in social media contexts (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Ellison et al., 2006; Hogan, 2010; Lin et al., 2017; Marwick & Boyd, 2010). An individual’s online profile, including avatars, interests, affiliations, friends lists, and status updates, as well as digitized activities such as likes, dislikes, comments, and location tagging on social media platforms (Chua & Chang, 2016; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011; Silva & Frith, 2012) can all be conceptualized as “expressive equipment” (Goffman, 1959, p. 22) to present oneself, crafted in the form of texts, photos, audios, videos, and web links. Social media complicates our ways of making meaning or seeing ourselves, as our identities are increasingly mediated through symbolic representations that are not only written and visual but also quantitative. These self-representations, as personal or social as they can be, says Rettberg (2017), constantly shape the way of seeing ourselves. Prior research demonstrates that social media is a potential channel for strategic self-presentation (Rui & Stefanone, 2013a; Uski & Lampinen, 2016) as large amounts of identificatory information are being disclosed by individuals on social media platforms. Arkin (1981) proposes that people are seeking more social approval than interactional goals so that they construct their self-images positively and selectively, seeking identification (of their positive self-presentations) and tending to reduce any negative impressions they might make (through more moderate disclosures) for fear of social rejection (protective self-presentation).

Leary and Kowalski (1990) conclude that impression motivations and impression construction are two stages of self-presentation. In social media, individuals are driven by various motivations to construct their positive and idealized impressions (Kramer & Haferkamp, 2011), such as attention and recognition seeking (Rui & Stefanone, 2013a), relationship maintenance, social capital accumulation (Ellison et al., 2007, 2014; Vitak, 2012), and identity construction (Frunzaru & Garbasevski, 2016; Marwick, 2016; Zhao et al., 2008). These goals can be shown in behaviors such as positively selecting, crafting, and sharing personal information online.

Technologies and online information generated by the user and others (Walther et al., 2009), the size and diversity of online social networks (Bazarova et al., 2013; Misoch, 2015; Rui & Stefanone, 2013a), culture (Lee-Won et al., 2014; Luo, 2014; Tokunaga, 2009), as well as personal traits and motivations (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Chen & Marcus, 2012; Hermann & Arkin, 2013) are among the vast array of factors widely discussed across the academic literature, which influence self-presentation and impression management. Some scholars argue that the growing size and diversity of online social networks (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Misoch, 2015; Vitak, 2012), and the abundance of linked data information sources (Rui & Stefanone, 2013b; Walther et al., 2009) can increase the difficulty in controlling one’s personal information and impression construction, thus triggering protective self-presentation strategies. For example, individuals could delete unpleasant posts on their profile pages and provide less information to avoid communicating an undesirable impression, or only disclose information appropriate to all members of the network, which is called “the lowest common denominator” by Hogan (2010, pp. 383–384). As social media promote connectedness and connectivity among technologies and online users (van Dijck, 2013), online social networks are growing more diverse, thus forming collapsed contexts (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). The collapsed contexts, or ways in which multiple sets of social contacts are formed by individuals in social media (when there are no equivalent multiple face-to-face contexts for them to interact with), brings to the fore the complexity of, and the difficulty in, managing imagined audiences (Marwick & Boyd, 2010) through online activities. It also highlights the complexities for individuals to navigate systematic information disclosures, thus bringing widespread concerns for privacy, especially when technical settings on social media platforms cannot safeguard personal information (Livingstone, 2008; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011). However, researchers also point out that disclosing personal information online (including what is considered to *be private by individuals*) enables self-expression and self-presentation and is an essential part of social interactions whether in face-to-face contexts, or in blogs (McCullagh, 2008), in *Twitter* and *Facebook* (Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011; Proudfoot et al., 2018), or in *Weibo* and *WeChat* (Yin & Li, 2016).

Method

This article reports on thematic analysis of data collected in an ethnographic study of social media practices among university students and rural women in a south-central city, Changsha, China. Participant observation of online interactions and two rounds of in-depth interviews (102 in total) were conducted during February and through to July 2015 with 26 university students and 25 rural women. In terms of online privacy, questions were asked, for example, “What is your opinion on online privacy?” “What do you think online privacy is?” and “How do you think about your online privacy?” Students were final-year students from a southern university aged from 21 to 25 years with different major backgrounds but gender balanced; rural women, aged from 40 to 52 years, came from Hanpu Town in rural Changsha. Noticeably, among this group of rural women, no one had attended university. Only three people received higher education and three had high school (3-year) qualification. Fifteen women attended middle school but three failed to finish it. Four women attended 6-year primary school, but one withdrew in the fifth year. These participants were chosen for the study based on opportunistic sampling methods.

Two considerations shaped the choice of the two divergent cohorts of participants in this study. University students, born after 1990, are a generation growing up in the digital age when internet and social media are penetrating their everyday lives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). They are representatives of highly educated youth who are sophisticated with new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and who are adept at applications of social media platforms for everyday communication, self-presentation, and identity construction (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). However, rural women aged older than 40 years tend to be socioeconomically more disadvantaged than Chinese university students in their use of the internet and social media. Rural Chinese women are located at the bottom of Chinese social stratification (Guo & Chen, 2011). Living in a patriarchal society, they are exposed to more institutional and cultural pressures than males (Jacka, 2006): They do not have education and employment resources equal to their rural male counterparts (D. Li & Tsang, 2003) and are restrained by social responsibilities and moral values attached to their traditional gender roles (Zhang, 2014). Because of the *hukou* system, they have less welfare entitlements than their urban contemporaries and, worse, are branded with social stigma (Guan & Liu, 2014). Also due to their poor education, rural Chinese women have less digital literacy. Older rural women are even facing more digital inequalities than younger rural women (Wallis, 2015). The social and technological contexts for older rural Chinese women therefore are drastically different compared with Chinese youth. How these contexts shape their understanding of online privacy remains unexplored. Comparing them with Chinese youth will not only enrich current privacy studies in China, but also shed light on how sociocultural

contexts influence individuals’ privacy perceptions and practices despite of divergent digital literacy between Chinese youth and rural women, which further contributes to the complex conceptualization of privacy and the solution for privacy issues in China.

Chinese Social Media Contexts

WeChat is currently the most popular social media platform among Chinese people (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017) and was widely used among participants in 2015. Launched by Tencent in 2011, it offers a wide range of services, including instant messaging, status update, reading, file transfer, gaming, shopping, and banking. *Moments* is where users can post texts, photos, and videos on *WeChat*. It also enables *WeChat* users to share their location publicly afforded by the “location” feature. With the feature *Subscription*, *WeChat* users can subscribe to official accounts registered by media outlets, enterprises, and individuals to get access to various user-generated contents such as news, articles, novels, and critical reviews that can also be circulated on *Moments*. *QQ*, another dominant social media platform inaugurated by Tencent in 1999, is similar to *WeChat* in many ways. In the study on which this article is based, seven elder rural Chinese women and all student participants had registered with *QQ* accounts while all the 51 participants had registered with *WeChat* accounts. *Qzone* is a blog-like service of *QQ* where users can write diaries, share their everyday lives, and interact with their *QQ* contacts. Twitter-resembled *Sina Weibo*, founded in 2009 by *Sina*, is a microblog platform that facilitates public discussion and political participation (Stockmann & Luo, 2017) and was only used by student participants. During the fieldwork, the researcher observed and collected the online threads shared by the 51 participants on these different social media platforms.

Findings and Discussion

Human Flesh Search

Students took it for granted that they had completely lost control of their online privacy although they had taken a range of precautions to protect it. Answering the researcher with the rhetorical question, “Online privacy? (I) feel there is already no privacy now, already no privacy,” Xiaohao was very critical of the situation of online privacy. The 23-year-old senior student from rural *Xiangxi*, the west of Hunan, was aware that information leakage happened frequently and getting access to someone’s personal information on the internet was very easy. He even suspected his university of giving in students’ personal information to third parties for benefits, invading his online privacy.

Xiaou, a 23-year-old girl studying Chinese literature shared the same view with Xiaohao, emphasizing that “there

is no privacy for being online” as “basically any information is traceable.” Xiaou gave an example of how perpetrators sourced personal information such as date of birth, ID number, and family address which nearly fruaded her classmate. Student Xiaolei, Xiaoyan, and Xiaochu used the phrase “human flesh search” (*ren rou sou suo*) to describe this kind of intrusion that personal information, including every detail of an individual, is retrieved and exploited via online channels. Except for the “material” information such as mobile phone number, as mentioned by Xiaochu, she was more concerned about her “emotions” being “human fleshed” or exposed on social media. Although “human flesh search” is argued to be often used by Chinese netizens to humiliate public figures (Liu & Fan, 2015), obviously from the students’ accounts, celebrities were not the mere population confronting this problem. Nine students in this study expressed that they had experienced personal information leak, identity theft, and online fraud. This further indicates that digital technologies are flawed to protect individuals’ privacy (Madejski, Johnson, & Bellovin, 2012) even when the population is a group of highly educated young people. When online information leakage becomes a commonplace and digital traces were beyond control, these young individuals became concerned and suspicious when using social media platforms. Completely ditching social media was not practical as social media had brought many benefits to them. In response to this dilemma, these young people chose to trade-off their personal information, forming a perception of “public online privacy.”

Public Online Privacy

The expression “public online privacy” which the Hunan University (HNU) students used meant that they were willing to make their personal information public in the online space knowing that information could be manipulated by third parties but there were perceived benefits in doing so. Xiaomei was one of the young people who demonstrated this online trade-off despite being aware that somebody might “fix their eyes” on and manipulate the information she eventually made publicly available online:

My standpoint is that no matter how, I cannot protect it. I might as well use it conveniently. Because sometimes if you protect it deliberately, there will be a lot of inconvenience.

The pressure Xiaomei received to have her actual name made public was not from the social media platforms or technology sources she used. It came from professional colleagues. Xiaomei was doing an internship at an advertising company. It was common that employees used *WeChat* and *QQ* to transfer files facilitated by the platform’s afforded functionality. Therefore, Xiaomei friended her colleagues using her *WeChat* and *QQ* contact details soon after she settled in with the company. What she also added to her *WeChat* contact

lists were some strangers whom she contacted for personal business, such as real estate agents and home-moving service workers. It was cheaper to communicate with these people via *WeChat* because it would not generate phone calls or text messaging costs. Xiaomei had deliberately disguised her real name as she did not trust the stranger contacts. However, her anonymity on *WeChat* and *QQ* raised complaints from her colleagues as this name could not be easily recognized and searched. If Xiaomei had continued to use the fake name, she would have left a bad impression for her colleagues and her boss, which would have been harmful to her professional identity and her relationship with them. Reflecting on this, Xiaomei replaced her pseudonym with her actual name regardless of any concerns about strangers in her network. In this regard, she compromised part of her private self online for the purposes of positive self-presentation.

Xiaolei, mentioned above, was more proactive in giving out personal information such as his name and mobile phone number although he felt annoyed sometimes by receiving harassing text messages. What was more critical to Xiaolei was not disclosing any information that could bring about shame and damage his face value. For instance, Xiaolei would conceal the fact that he had failed the College English Test-6 explaining that he would never show arrogance or a lack of confidence although he felt these afflictions sometimes. What Xiaolei desired was a positive identity showing that he was confident, humble, professional and intelligent, or in his words “*bige* 逼格” (the ability of pretending/bragging) presenting his superior taste (P. Li, 2015). To construct this identity, he used the tagline “Xiaolei (his real first name) aspires to become excellent product manager” as his *WeChat* name, sharing his location on *Moments* when he attended educational or professional training workshops (see Figure 1), or when he ate out at a restaurant (see Figure 2.).

To present an impression of studying hard and to show off his “*bige*,” Xiaolei had little concern about how his location information could be utilized.

Similar to Xiaolei, female participant Xiaoli acted differently toward privacy issues depending on the particular platform. It is widely regarded that *Weibo* is a public platform while *WeChat* is more private (Stockmann & Luo, 2017). Interestingly, Xiaoli, however, held the view that she had no privacy on *WeChat* and had more privacy on *Weibo*. As she reasoned, “people normally tend to present the good side of themselves on *WeChat*.” Because of this, she rarely shared negative feelings on *WeChat*, whereas on *Weibo*, where she networked with very few preexisting social contacts, she had no qualms about disclosing this kind of information. For instance, Xiaoli complained about her manager on the *Weibo* platform, for she knew that her superior and colleagues on *WeChat* would not see this information and form a bad impression of her. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of Xiaoli’s complaints on *Weibo*.

Notably, Xiaoli also shared her location while she posted on *Weibo*. The much broader audience of public-strangers on

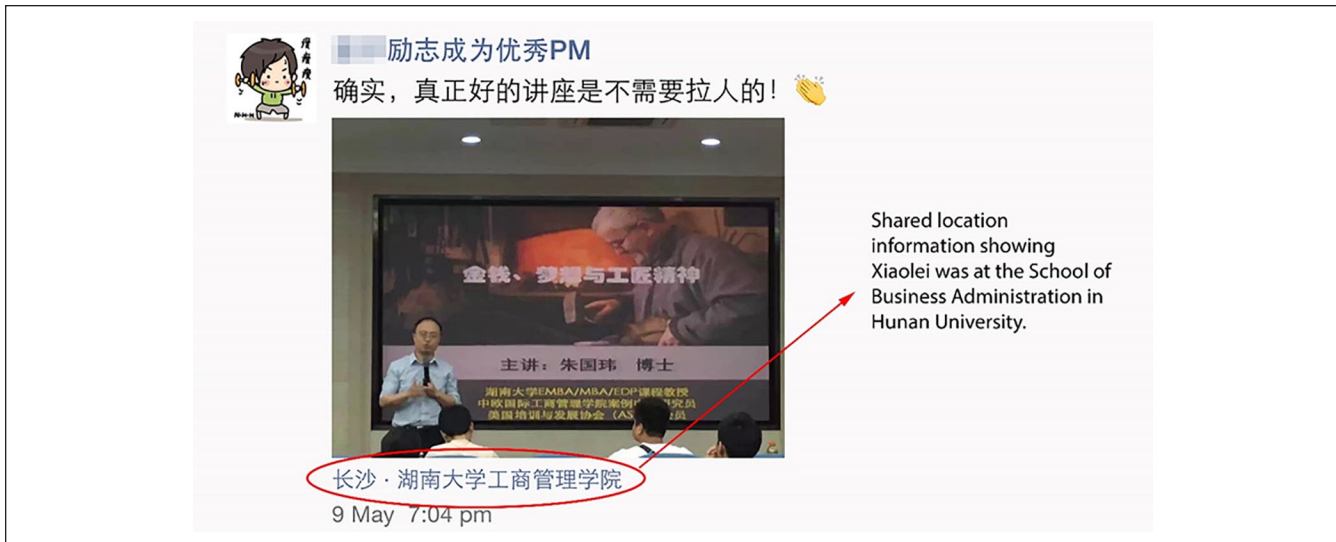


Figure 1. Xiaolei's status on Moments about attending a workshop.
Note. In this post, Xiaolei wrote, "indeed, really good workshop needs not to drag people."



Figure 2. Xiaolei's status on Moments about eating in a restaurant.
Note. In this post, Xiaolei wrote, "coming to have barbecue in Hedong after reading literature for the whole day, so many people!"

Weibo did not appear to pose any privacy concerns for her at all in respect of threats to her reputation. Rather, it is exactly in this space with more strangers and less familiar ties that Xiaoli's privacy was retained. Xiaomei's, Xiaolei's, and Xiaoli's experiences all provided evidence that shame, face, and self-presentation in regard to identity management were tightly related and raised more concerns among Chinese youth than the potential for their digitized personal details to be accessed did. Although they were acutely aware of different forms of privacy risks, they were still willing to exchange their private details for social benefits.

"Improved Firewall"

Xiaobo was well aware of the Chinese online technological and political contexts while he was using social media, saying

that big data made privacy more and more public. Like others, he gave out his personal information for social benefits. In terms of sharing political views, though, he became more protective. For studying, Xiaobo relied on VPNs to get information from foreign websites such as the *New York Times*, Facebook, and YouTube that were blocked by the Great Firewall (Clayton et al., 2006). However, the enhanced online control by the Chinese government in recent years (Negro, 2017) destructed the condition of gaining a convenient entry for him: More and more VPNs became ineffective. Xiaobo complained about this in the interview: "I am very much pissed off . . . recently it's getting inconvenient to open the webpages . . . has blocked them quite seamlessly. So, quite hard . . . Feeling like (laugh) the firewall has been improved."

Knowing not only international access was restricted but also public opinions were monitored and sometimes deleted



Figure 3. Xiaoli's Weibo status in which she complained her internship.

Note. In this post, Xiaoli wrote, "a period of painful life as an assembly line worker is heart-wrenching, finally found a more upset thing than Japanese, great awakening."

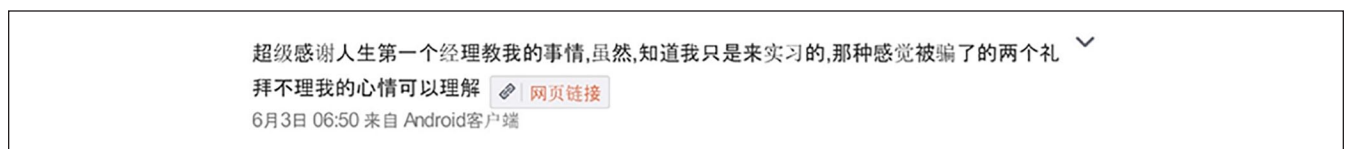


Figure 4. Xiaoli's Weibo post in which she mocked her manager.

Note. In this post, Xiaoli wrote, "super thanks to my first manager in my life who teaches me lessons, despite knowing I'm here only for internship. That feeling of ignoring me for two weeks after being tricked is understandable."

on social media (Harwit, 2016), Xiaobo chose not to share his political dispositions online, enacting protective self-presentation as demonstrated by Amos et al. (2014). Rather, he discussed political topics privately in offline settings to control the dissemination of any content that could disadvantage him as he remarked: "I won't say many things (online), but in fact I talk more about it with friends or relatives privately, but I won't publish it in a public space because I would consider it relevantly, rather 'that' . . ."

"I Don't Have Any Privacy"

Older rural Chinese women were also trying to navigate digital media and deal with the issues of self-presentation and keeping certain information private (although ideas of online censorship had never occurred to them). Similar to young people, these women also engaged with *WeChat* and *QQ* platforms; interacted with their families, relatives, and neighbors; and reconnected with schoolmates they had not seen for years. And some of them were even enjoying the novelty of interacting with strangers online. They shared their daily lives on *WeChat Moments* and subscribed to *WeChat* official accounts for information such as local news, jokes, stories, and other themed articles. Interestingly, in contrast to the students from HNU, when the topic of privacy was raised, they were reluctant to respond, and their immediate answer was always, "I don't have any privacy," as if the concept was something they deliberately sought to distance themselves from. For instance,

52-year-old Chen Hua spoke *positively* about the fact that she did not have privacy on the internet:

I think there isn't any privacy. There is no reason for me to have privacy on the Internet. Not much privacy . . . You . . . do not go . . . decades-year-old person do not go to have love relationship with these people. There is nothing that cannot be exposed, is there? No reason to have privacy. Usually anyway (I) talk about housework, chat, talk about housework, no reason to have privacy.

It turned out that Chen Hua was striving to emphasize that she had no dubious relationship with strangers online, because she naturally associated "having privacy" as being secretive and deceitful with others (beyond the family). She explained privacy as such: "For example, through Internet, some who have families have love relationship with others. That is having some privacy."

Reflecting on the fact that she did not have affairs with other men on *WeChat*, Chen equated this with her understanding that she did not, therefore, have any online privacy. Expanding further, she claimed that everyone could look up her mobile phone and *WeChat* anytime and that information stored in her *WeChat* could even be made public, posing no risk to her reputation. The traditional meaning of privacy as derogatory and as referring to an "illegitimate sexual relationship" (H. Wang, 2011, p. 34) was exceptionally strong among the Hanpu Town women, so much so that this idea had become symbolically embedded in their perceptions of their own and others' privacy.

Another privacy practice that exemplifies the rootedness of traditional privacy concepts relates to family conflicts. Family is an important privacy unit in Chinese culture as intimate relationships are formed in it (Pik-chu, 2012). The Chinese proverb “do not wash your dirty linen in public” indicates how privacy is kept in the unit of family. As such, the notion of privacy is considered to be secrets that people should not tell outside of the family. Consequently, the rural women were surprised that there was even a suggestion of so-called privacy in any social media contexts because they chose not to disclose any shameful secrets online at all. Forty-three-year-old Liu Jia questioned, “The Internet has privacy? Then I don’t have privacy. If there is privacy, can it be called Internet? Everybody will see it. Can we call it privacy? Then that is not privacy.”

Like Chenhua, Liu Jia also indicated that anyone could look up her *WeChat* and find there was nothing to conceal. For her, family conflicts like not getting along with her husband or her mother-in-law was her private responsibility and it would disgrace her whole family if she exposed it to the outside. Instead, she posted selfies and photos of her children and friends without showing any concern about the personal matters at all:

You have something that you don’t want to tell. It is something in your heart, that you don’t want to tell others, tell the outside, don’t want to let others know. This is privacy. For instance, me and my husband have some problems, have some estrangements. You can only solve these by yourself. Others cannot settle them for you. This is privacy. I can’t write it up (on *WeChat*)! How can we let others solve (problems) whatever happens to me and my husband? Others would laugh. There is a sense of ridicule, I think, isn’t there? This is privacy.

Rural women perceived privacy first and foremost as equal to having disreputable affairs and shameful secrets and regarded family as the important privacy unit. With the emergence of new information communication technologies, this privacy value was reinterpreted by them in relation to their participation in social media activities. The notion has deep roots in Confucianism and can be interpreted by Confucianist moral standards, particularly about women. Rural Chinese women are living in a patriarchal society bounded by ethical values prescribed by Confucianism. The most famous Confucianist principles are Three Obediences (*San Cong*) which “require women to obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband” and Four Virtues (*Si De*) which include “(sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent” (Gao, 2003, p. 116). Due to these traditions, Chinese women’s status in the family deeply affects their sense of autonomy and any private matters are subject to their husbands and to the whole family. Their privacy perceptions are therefore culturally naturalized by gender relations, leading them to insinuate privacy as sexual misconduct.

Also in Confucianism, family is considered the most important social space for Chinese women (Fan, 2003), strongly molding Chinese women’s conceptualizations about privacy boundaries. Women are expected to be focusing on things in the household like doing housework and taking care of children while men should be in charge of things outside the household like working to feed the family, a model known as “men outside, women inside” (Kwok-to, 2012, p. 556). Due to the embeddedness of Confucian culture in Chinese society, these traditional gender roles are still observable in contemporary China, especially in rural areas where Confucian values have much stronger hold than in cities (Fan, 2003; Leung, 2003). As social media provides more opportunities for reaching out to a more extensive social network, including strangers, going online means more than managing business in the household for Chinese rural women. This not only has the potential to dismantle the traditional gender values for Chinese women as they could meet strangers and challenge the familial male authority in gender relations; it also breaks up the privacy boundary set between the household and the outer world. For rural Chinese women, having love affairs with strangers through social media and disclosing unsettling family matters and dishonorable secrets were a violation of social norms and ethical values attached to their sexual identity. By claiming therefore that “I don’t have any privacy,” these rural Chinese women in fact actually continued to maintain control over their privacy, in the online context, so that they could maintain a proper social identity as an ordinary rural woman.

Negotiated Privacy Boundary

While Chinese youth were overwhelmed by the capability of big data technologies in reaching out personal information, their practices, on the contrary, demonstrate their endeavor to negotiate privacy boundary in their social contexts. Twenty-five-year-old Xiaokang, from a rural town in Shanxi province claimed that he did not disclose privacy matters publicly on *WeChat* and *QQ*. Yet, he kept his online posts about his love relationship like photos with his girlfriends from being accessed by the fieldwork researcher² through utilizing the privacy setting on *WeChat* while his other *WeChat* contacts such as classmates, friends, and relatives could see those posts. For Xiaokang, the researcher was like a stranger in which he had less trust and should be restricted in accessing some of his private posts. As such, Xiaokang negotiated a privacy boundary among different social networks.

Xiaoyu, 21-year-old Hunan girl maintained her social networks differentially on *QQ*, *WeChat*, and *Weibo*. She made connections with high school classmates and some teachers from her university on *QQ* and kept in touch with family, friends, current classmates from the university on *WeChat*. On *Weibo*, most of her followers were strangers, including even bots and zombie accounts. Due to these different social

networks formed on different platforms, Xiaoyu built up distinct privacy perceptions on each of the platforms as she described:

. . . (on *WeChat*) all are friends. Anyway, we are familiar. It doesn't matter. So (I) feel like not much privacy. Then I won't deliberately hide anything.

. . . people I know in my real (offline) life give me a sense of security in online life, because you (they) are the people I know. People on *WeChat* are the people I know. Anyhow you guys engage with my everyday life quite often, I think there is no need to hide anything from you . . . However, I don't play *Weibo* much. There is a bunch of weird *daigou* (purchase-on-behalf agents), coming from nowhere who friended me (on *Weibo*). I think this is not good. And I don't know how to stop others from friending me. (I am) not good at playing (*Weibo*). *QQ*'s networks are old friends, old classmates. I don't know what they are doing. What if they are doing pyramid sale? Therefore, I don't post my own stuff.

Similar to Xiaokang's case, Xiaoyu also obtained a sense of trust from people that she knew very well on *WeChat* and had no concern about disclosing her personal information to them. Whereas old contacts on *QQ* and unknown followers on *Weibo* were not trustworthy anymore, she chose not to disclose her personal matters on these two platforms to retain her privacy. It could be seen that privacy boundaries were drawn by the young people among their tiered social networks.

Aligned with students, rural women also developed strong trust among their social networks of acquaintances. For instance, at the very beginning of the fieldwork, Fang Liu blocked the stranger-ethnographer from accessing her *WeChat Moments*, and *Qzone*. In addition, some rural women were active in sharing their emotions, selfies, and photos of their grandchildren as they did not consider this information were shared to circles outside of the privacy boundary. Zheng Xiaoyu presented this viewpoint:

Sharing articles, you need to write information. I don't share it to the outside. It is just these friends . . . I think there is not much privacy . . . It is alright to let these friends have a look . . . I only share these links of videos, reposting from others.

Although Zheng Xiaoyu posted her selfies and photos of her grandson on *WeChat Moments*, privacy concern never occurred to her. It was those preexisting trustworthy friend circles that molded her privacy perception on *WeChat*.

Wang Min even described her Moments as "transparent" to imply that she had nothing to hide from her acquaintances on *WeChat*: "That is very transparent! . . . I don't share things one to one normally. Anyway, I share things to all on Moments because they are acquaintances. It doesn't matter."

It appears reasonable to conclude that the privacy notions of Chinese youth and rural women both were shaped by their

social networks on social media. Fei (2012) argues that Chinese social relationships (*guanxi*) are formed like ripples spreading out from the center of the self, according to the differentiated degree of intimacy the relationships attached to the person. The mechanism of *guanxi* is derived from the Confucian hierarchical system of five cardinal relationships (*wulun*): emperor–subject, father–son, elder brother–younger brother, husband–wife, and friend–friend. Family relationship is the closest to the self, followed by relationships of friends and friends, superiors, and workmates. Strangers are the least relevant (Hwang, 1987). Privacy is therefore negotiated and graded as individuals negotiate their positions in these relationships. Relationships with higher degree of intimacy like circles of family and friends embody higher level of privacy (Pik-chu, 2012) and facilitate self-disclosure. Although online environment enables Chinese individuals to build new relationships, they still maintain preexisting relationships through various social media platforms (T. Wang, 2013). For students like Xiaokang and Xiaoyu, and rural women like Zheng Xiaoyu and Wang Min, family, friends, classmates and acquaintances, which constituted their social media contacts dominantly, were networks that marked off the privacy boundaries from strangers.

Conclusion

Chinese youth and older rural women in Changsha are engaged in negotiation within their own groups, with others, and in interactions with big data that may or may not benefit them. There are differences and similarities in the way that this negotiation occurs. Shameful secrets touch on the protection of the reputation of those concerned, common to both groups. The youth group in Changsha, however, has a stronger understanding of the technical level of deployment of the social media technologies. Common to all the conceptions of privacy is the level of control that an individual perceives that they have over the big data surrounding them and how presentation of their identity is kept within their control or handed over to others.

For Chinese youth, even amid a perceived plague of privacy invasion, they are willing to take the risk of "human flesh search" and "public online privacy" for positive self-presentation in the hope that they could be benefited both economically and socially. But the intensifying internet censorship in China triggers protective self-presentation in social media, in particular showing Chinese youth's concern toward their online political context. Social media companies like *Tencent* and *Sina* reinforce this situation in their technological design and content management (Stockmann & Luo, 2017).

Rural Chinese women show no concern about the complex technological and political contexts because of a lack of knowledge about the very platforms that they use. Their ideas of privacy are shaped more by their social position, of being a housewife bound with moral responsibilities, than by

sophisticated knowledge and deployment of social media. This has consequences, of course, for how they maximize their life chances in a digital economy. The stratification, inequality, that the rural women face stands in stark contrast to the social mobility of the youth cohort.

The social media experiences of both Chinese young people and rural women presented here demonstrate that social relationships play an important role in the construction of privacy perceptions and behaviors and preexisting social relationships tend to exert more control than strangers (unlike Western countries where strangers can be embraced quickly). In Chinese culture, the boundaries of privacy are blurred and graded in terms of the degree of intimacy the person attaches to different circles of social relationships. What is considered to be an individual's privacy in one circle can turn out to be no privacy in another circle.

This discussion sounds very much like Moor's (1997) *restricted access view of privacy*, raised at the beginning of the article, where citizens focus on their relationships and who they can trust, rather than relying solely on institutions or legislation that may ensure their full control of data. Indeed, accounts from the youth show how nuanced this focus can be. The youth cohort understands that benefits, social status or monetary, can be gained by engagement with big data. Privacy in contemporary Chinese culture, therefore, cannot be interpreted simply or merely as digitally identifiable personal information or the technological control of online privacy. Development of methods of protection of privacy in a big data world cannot rely only on abstract guesses but requires ethnographically rich insights into the everyday engagements with social media and other digital technologies.

This article does not pretend to represent all Chinese people dealing with big data in their own lives or to provide solutions to which conceptions of privacy might be best in a legislative context. The fieldwork, moreover, did not include in its initial construction gender as a comparison element, limiting any explanation of how gender may make a difference among the younger and older participants (e.g., by adding males to the rural cohort). Importantly, also, there are diverse ethnic groups in China other than the majority Han that would be significant for inclusion in further studies.

However, it is clear from the empirical data presented by the authors that Chinese citizens in the fieldwork, younger and older, are well aware that they are negotiating boundaries of privacy among various technological, social, and cultural demands. Issues of skill in negotiating those boundaries and deployment of personal identity have become fundamentally important in everyday life and future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, approval No. 19CXW025.

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Notes

1. This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the author's study university, Approval No. H-2014-0348. Informants are de-identified in this article by using pseudonyms and pixelated images.
2. The fieldwork researcher found out that she was being blocked from seeing Xiaokang's posts of his love relationship in the second interview with Xiaokang when she asked him whether he blocked the fieldwork researcher on *WeChat*. The interview question was to evaluate trust between the researcher and the participants.

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