Cross-Cultural Comparisons of ‘Selfie’-Presentation:

A Content Analysis

Taking and sharing selfies is a popular way of self-presentation (Chua & Chang, 2016). A selfie is defined as a photograph of oneself taken by oneself, typically with a smartphone or a webcam and shared on social media (Fox and Rooney, 2015). First used in 2002, the word “selfie” went viral between the year of 2012 and 2013, with its usage increasing by 17,000 % (Bennett, 2014). Thanks to this massive popularity, it was named by Oxford English Dictionary as word of the year in 2013 (Barrineau, 2013). Later, Twitter declared 2014 as year of the selfie (Ng, 2014).

Selfies are popular worldwide on social media (Tifentale, 2015). As of October 2019, on Instagram, more than 400 million photographs were hashtaged with #selfie. On China’s Weibo, the topic of #selfie was viewed for over 390 million times. On Snapchat, about 75% of all photos were selfies (Cohen, 2016). Content analyses have been conducted on people’s profile pictures on MySpace (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012) and Facebook (Sarabia & Estevez, 2016; Zheng, Yuan, Chang, & Wu, 2016), #fitspiration posts on Instagram (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017), and #thinspiration images on Pinterest and Twitter (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). However, these images were not necessarily selfies.

Studies specifically analyzing selfies have focused on gender differences in gender display (Doring, Reif, & Poeschi, 2016), face-ism (Babic, Ropert, & Musil, 2018) and camera angle (Sedgewick, Flath, & Elias, 2017). Few studies, however, have looked at selfies from the perspective of cultural appearance ideals, and even fewer studies examined selfies from a cross-cultural perspective. In addition, most of the samples in these studies were drawn from White women speaking English. As a result, China, the world’s most populous country where over 1

billion people are using social media (Lee, 2019), was largely overlooked.

Applying the theory of cultural appearance ideal and the theory of self-sexualization, the present study analyzed and compared Caucasian/White women’s selfies on Twitter, and Chinese women’s selfies on Weibo. Differences in facial dominance, and levels of sexualization and cuteness were explored.

Ideal Women Body across Cultures: Face or Body

Almost all cultures have norms that expect women to adhere to measures of physical attractiveness (Jung & Lee, 2006). However, ideal female bodies vary across cultures; they are culturally determined (Mellor et al., 2016). For example, beauty standards for women in Western societies are different from those in East Asia. Studies showed that beauty of women in the U.S. was constructed in terms of the *body*, i.e., weight and shape, whereas East Asian women care more about their *facial* features (Wu & Lang, 2018; Staley & Zhan, 2011; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005). When women in the Western world crave for extreme thinness (Thompson & Stice, 2001), Chinese women dream of a smaller face, bigger eyes, a narrower chin, and a taller nose (Jackson & Chen, 2015; Luo, 2012; Hua, 2009).

A content analysis of women’s magazine advertising in the U.S., Taiwan and Singapore revealed that ads in the U.S. were dominated by clothing, whereas East Asian ads featured facial beauty products (Frith et al., 2005). Similarly, a study found that over 80% of Chinese selfies on Weibo showed their body parts above chest, whereas almost 40% of Twitter selfies were half- or full-body shots (Ma & Yang, 2016).

Body ideals can be reflected in people’s ‘selfie’-presentation (Grogan, Rothery, Cole, & Hall, 2018). For example, women take multiple selfies and only post the best one (Wagner, Aguirre, & Sumner, 2016); they choose the background, design their pose in advance, and apply

the perfect angle when taking a selfie (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015); they use filter cameras and photo-editing applications, tweaking their selfies before posting (“#bodypositive,” 2018). Based on the literature that White women focus on thinness whereas Chiense women care more about their facial beauty, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: White women’s selfies on Twitter have more body shots than Chinese women’s selfies on Weibo.

An extreme way of focusing on one’s body in a selfie is to exclude the face altogether or to exhibit only a tiny portion of it. In either case, it is an “incomplete facial selfie”. Also, taking a selfie that captures the whole body is difficult: the phone is limited to her arm’s reach. Mirror selfies render this much easier and that is why they are so popular (Shi, 2019). Considering that White women focus on their body, the second hypothesis is formulated:

H2: White women on Twitter take more (a) incomplete facial selfies and (b) mirror selfies than Chinese women on Weibo.

Although beauty for women in the Western societies is more based on the body, studies found, or at least indicated, that White women still prefer using a portrait rather than a full body shot as the profile image on their social media (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). Based on this finding, the third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: White women on Twitter take more headshot selfies than body-shot selfies.

Women’s Self-Sexualization on Social Media

Sexualization of women is prevalent in the U.S. media (Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2016). Self-sexualization occurs when a person intentionally engages in activities to appear sexually appealing (Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Living in “sexually objectifying

environments” (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011), girls and women are more likely to self-sexualize when they internalize the belief that sexualized behaviors and appearances are “approved of and rewarded by society” (APA, 2007, p. 3). Studies examining self-sexualizing behaviors on social media generated mixed results. Sarabia and Estevez (2016) found that more than half of all Facebook profiles they studied were sexualized, whereas Ramsey and Horan (2018), after analyzing over 1,000 female Facebook and Instagram profiles, concluded that the rate of self-sexualization was relatively low.

The cross-cultural study by Frith et al. (2015) which compared women’s magazine advertising in the US and in Asian cultures (Singapore and Taiwan) found that the beauty type of “sexual/sex kitten” appeared significantly more frequently in the U.S. ads than in East Asian ads. Because media portrayals reflect and influence the way women in a culture view their bodies (Xie & Zhang, 2013; Thompson & Stice, 2001) and selfies are a popular way of self-presentation, it is an educated guess that White women’s selfies will be more sexualized than Chinese women’s selfies.

In previous studies (Ramsey & Horan, 2018; Ruckel & Hill, 2017), women’s self-sexualization on social media have been operationalized by examining body exposure (e.g., breast, buttock, legs, genitals, etc.), and sexual suggestiveness (pose, mouth, touch, etc.). Based on these coding schemes, the present study formulated the following hypotheses:

H4: White women’s selfies on Twitter have a higher degree of body exposure in terms of (a) cleavage/breasts; (b) midriff; (c) buttock; and (d) thigh than Chinese women’s selfies on Weibo.

H5: White women’s selfies on Twitter have a higher degree of sexual suggestiveness in terms of (a) hair; (b) pose; and (c) self-touching than Chinese women’s selfies on Weibo.

H6: White women’s selfies on Twitter are more sexualized than selfies of Chinese women on Weibo in terms of (a) body exposure; (b) sexual suggestiveness; (c) and the two measurements combined.

Cuteness

In East Asia, cuteness was studied as “Japanese kawaii, South Korean aegyo, and Taiwanese and mainland Chinese sajiao” (Abidin, 2016, p. 33-4). In East Asian context, a woman is cute if she appears childish (Zitong, 2013), controllable and helpless (Yueh, 2013), and vulnerable (Abidin, 2016). Cuteness may be enacted by Chinese women who “coo in a baby voice, bat their eyelashes or pout using bug puppy eyes” (p.232) and most Chinese men would respond positively to women’s cute appearances and behaviors (Zitong, 2013).

Many studies on cuteness in Asian context have focused on adults, whereas many of the relevant studies in Western context have focused on infants (Little, 2012; Sprengelmeyer et al., 2009). This demonstrated the possibility that cuteness among women is more popular in East Asia than in Western societies. The first research question was formulated:

RQ1: Did Chinese women show a higher degree of cuteness in their selfies than White women?

Sexualization, Cuteness and Performance of Social Media Posts

People’s responses to selfies of different levels of sexualization and cuteness are also worth investigating. Daniels and Zurbriggen (2014) showed that those who used a sexualized profile were considered “less physically and socially attractive and less competent” (p. 11). Also, since sex is still a sensitive topic in China (Chow, 2017), highly sexualized selfies might not be able to generate a large volume of discussions. Cute selfies, on the other hand, might be popular because Chinese men favor women demonstrating cuteness. The following research question was

formulated:

RQ2: On both platforms (Twitter and Weibo), controlling for the number of users’ followers, did posts of (a) a higher degree of sexualization (controlling for degree of cuteness), and (b) a higher degree of cuteness (controlling for degree of sexualization), generate more replies, retweets, and favorites?

Methods

Data Collection

The author obtained IRB approval for the present study. Samples (N = 500) were 250 selfies of Caucasian/White women (randomly selected from 26,733 images) on Twitter and 250 selfies of Chinese women (randomly selected 8,866 images) on China’s Weibo.

“#Selfie” and “#selfies” were used as keywords for searching on Twitter. On Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of these two English words, namely, *zipai*, was searched. On both platforms, posts uploaded between 00:01 on December 31, 2017 to 23: 59 on January 1, 2019 were accessed. Since both platforms are international in scope, Coordinated Universal Time (CUT) was applied. A whole year’s worth of relevant posts was retrieved to control for the effects of weather and seasons on selfie taking and sharing activities.

Twitter data was obtained through OSoMe’s Enhanced Data API. OSoMe is short for Observatory on Social media. OSoMe stored statistically valid samples of 10% of all public tweets starting from August 1, 2016. For the present study, all relevant data of each post, for example, ID, links to the images imbedded, texts, user’s location, links to user’s profile page, etc., was downloaded in a JSON file, and then was transformed and stored as a Microsoft Excel file. A total of 35,524 posts were retrieved.

Weibo data was accessed from Advanced Search on Weibo.com. For each search, Weibo

has a 50-page limit, each page containing 20 posts. To overcome this limitation, a shorter period than a whole year was applied. For example, the period between December 31, 2017 and January 10, 2018 was first attempted. If the search returned 50 pages of results, it meant that some posts were not returned due to the 50-page limit. If that was the case, then a shorter period, say, from December 31, 2017 to January 5, 2018 was applied. The procedure continued until the number of pages in the results was lower than 50. This procedure was automated and all relevant data of each post, for example, its post ID, time when it was uploaded, the imbedded texts, image links, links to user’s profile page, and the number of retweets, comments, and likes was downloaded through web scraping and then stored in a Microsoft Excel file.

After data was downloaded, posts that did not meet the requirement of the present study were excluded before data selection and data analysis: for both platforms, only *original* posts containing *image(s)* that were not labelled as *sexually sensitive* were included in analysis. Also, to duplicate posts sharing the same ID were deleted.

Unoriginal posts were not included because for a retweet, the person sharing this post might not be the person in the photo. Posts without images were excluded because images, rather than texts, were the units of analysis in the study. Posts containing sexually sensitive images were excluded because Weibo follows a restrict censorship policy: images exposing nipples and/or vulva will be deleted. Were sensitive images included, it would have been “unfair” to Twitter which only labels these images as “possibly sensitive” without deleting them.

To meet these requirements, on Weibo’s advanced search, “original” under the “type” column, and “containing images” under the “elements” column were checked. This setting generated a total of 8,866 posts where 33,074 images were imbedded. Among these, post IDs were checked but no repetition was found.

For Twitter, duplicates were removed based tweet ID. Also, tweets without images and retweets were excluded. Sexually sensitive tweets were labelled as “possibly_sensitive: ture”; posts with this label were deleted. Since the study compares women in Anglosphere countries and Chinese women, only tweets by Twitter users using English, i.e., posts with “users>lang:en” or “user>lang:en-gb”, were included in later data screening and analysis. A total of 26,733 posts remained after this screening.

Data Selection

First, for both Weibo and Twitter data, posts were ranked according to random numbers generated by Excel’s RAND function. Selfies were selected from top to bottom. For both platforms, sampling stopped when 250 selfies were accessed. This made sure that each post had an equal chance of being selected. The JSON file generated by Twitter only included the link to the first image imbedded in a post, whereas Weibo data was not restricted by this rule. To make comparisons fair, for both platforms, only the first image in a post was examined. Also, many Chinese women merge many pictures in just on image so as to put as many pictures as possible in just one post. If that is the case, then only the first selfie, i.e., the upper-left one, was examined.

For both platforms, only selfies meeting the requirements detailed in Appendix A were included. The rationale behind these requirements was that the selfie should be taken both *by* and *for* the person herself. Videos were not included because they consisted of many still images, making it difficult to tell which image to analyze. A photo featuring more than one person was excluded because the presence of another person might have influenced the selfie-takers’ selfie-presentation. Similarly, a selfie taken with a landmark was not primarily for showing her best (physical) self; rather, it was meant to show the place.

Selfies taken by people below 13 were excluded from analysis because Twitter had a longtime age restriction rule (above 13), whereas Weibo set minimum age (above 14) only at the end of 2018 (Deng, 2018). To make comparison fair, on both platforms, selfies by users under 13 at the time of posting were excluded.

For selfies meeting the above listed requirements, the profile page of the selfie taker was examined. Selfies were excluded if: (a) the profile was highly commercialized, for example, containing links to Amazon waitlists, onlyfans.com, and cashme.com; and (b) the profile was labelled as containing sensitive contents.

The aim of the study was to compare selfies of Caucasian/White women living in seven Anglosphere countries, namely, United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa. Selfies meeting above requirements were included in the study as long as the location of people sharing these photos were within these seven countries.

Many White women did not specify their location but the present study decided to include their selfies. This was because for women living in non-Anglosphere countries, for example, Italy, France, and Germany, the fact that they were posting in English meant that (a) they absorbed information online in English and (b) they were targeting audiences using English. Therefore, their selfies would conform to cultural appearance ideals in Anglosphere countries. A similar procedure applied when selfies on Weibo were selected: selfies of people looking Chinese were included when they did not specify their location.

Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability (ICR)

Two coders participated in the present study. They went through over 20 hours of training before ICR calculation, which was based on Krippendorff’s *Alpha* (α). The first 100 selfies—50 for Weibo and 50 for Twitter—were used for training purposes. Then 50 selfies (25 from each

platform) were used for ICR testing. A 10-page codebook with concrete examples was used by both coders while training. The first ICR was not desirable. Disagreements were discussed and the codebook was revised. Another set of 25 selfies on each platform was used to calculate ICR again. This time, ICR for all variables reached excellent agreement for initial reliability (Krippendorrf’s *Alpha* > .75; Sorin et al., 2016).

After acceptable initial ICR (denoted by Krippendorff’s α_1) was obtained, two coders split the remaining 450 selfies (225 for each platform). Data for selfies used in ICR testing was incorporated in final analysis after disagreements between by two coders were settled. Among the 450 selfies, 50 were coded for final ICR (denoted by Krippendorff’s α_2). Again, final ICR for all variables were above .75, indicating consistency and accuracy of the coding scheme.

Measurements

A woman’s selfie meeting the above listed requirements was the unit of analysis in the present study. Operationalization of categories is as follows:

Shot size. Shot size is defined as the amount of body included in the selfie. Selfies whose bottom of the visible body was above the waist were categorized as “head shots”. If the bottom was below waists, it was classified as “body shots”. A rule of thumb was to see whether the top of the selfie-taker’s trousers was visible; if not, it was a head shot. When the top of trousers was covered by the coat, the location of waist was guessed by the coders.

If the person’s face was not visible, either not in the selfie at all, or blocked by hands, arms, or any other objects, then the selfie was an “incomplete facial selfie”. If the selfie would have been a “head shot” provided that the face was visible, then the selfie was coded as “incomplete with the focus on face”. Otherwise, it was coded as “incomplete with the focus on body”. If a selfie was “incomplete with the focus on face”, it would be considered as a “head

shot”. Similarly, selfies coded as “incomplete with the focus on body” were treated as “body shots”.

For shot size, the initial ICR, Krippendorff’s α_1, equaled to 1.00. The final ICR, Krippendorff’s α_2, was .90.

Mirror selfie. This variable measured whether the selfie was taken before a mirror. It is a dichotomous variable coded as “Yes” or “No” (Krippendorff’s $\alpha_1 = .91$, $\alpha_2 = 1.00$).

Coding of body exposure. ***Cleavage and/or breasts tissues.*** In a selfie, if the cleavage or breast tissues were visible, it was coded as “visible”. If the flesh was not visible, but the contour of the breasts was clear, the selfie was coded as “not visible but with contour”. A selfie where neither flesh nor contour was visible was categorized as “not visible and no contour” ($\alpha_1 = .76$, $\alpha_2 = .85$).

Midriff. Selfies where the area from the bottom of the breasts to the top of trousers, panties or swimsuits was visible were coded as “completely visible”. If the exposure of flesh was incomplete, it was coded as “slightly visible”. If not even a tiny part of the flesh in midriff was visible, the selfie was classified into “not visible” ($\alpha_1 = 1.00$, $\alpha_2 = .93$).

Buttock. Selfies in which the flesh of buttock(s) was shown, especially when she was wearing panties or swimsuits, or even completely naked, were coded as “completely visible”. If the person was wearing provocative clothing or naked, but only the edges of the buttock(s) were shown, it was coded as “slightly visible”. When the flesh was not shown at all, it was “not visible” ($\alpha_1 = 1.00$, $\alpha_2 = .90$).

Thigh. Selfies where a person wearing panties, swimsuits or nothing at all exposed a large amount of flesh in the area of her thigh(s) were coded as “completely visible”. If she exposed thigh’s flesh but was wearing shorts or miniskirts, the selfie was classified as “slightly

visible”. A selfie was coded as “not visible” if no flesh was visible. A person wearing ripped jeans was not coded as exposing flesh (α_1 = 1.00, α_2 = .94).

Coding for sexual suggestiveness. ***Hair.*** Sexual suggestiveness of hair was coded on three levels: “extremely suggestive”, “slightly suggestive” and “not suggestive”. A person’s hair was considered “extremely suggestive” if the hair (a) was intentionally made messy, (b) covered one or both eyes, or (c) was in motion. If the hair was long (at least reaching mouth’s level), down, and surrounding face, or that hair was intentionally put on shoulders or chest, it was regarded as “slightly suggestive”. Otherwise, the hair was coded as “not suggestive” (α_1 = .82, α_2 = .79).

Pose. Sexual suggestiveness of pose was treated as a binary variable. A pose was coded as “sexually suggestive” if the person was (a) lying on her stomach, side, or back; (b) making a flirty pose, i.e., hip leaning to her left or right; (c) widely spreading her legs, either horizontally or vertically; (d) thrusting pelvic, either forward or upward; (e) intentionally pulling down straps or clothing on shoulder(s); (f) taking off her pants but stopped halfway; or (g) intentionally unbuttoning the buttons on trousers or blouses. Otherwise, the pose was coded as “not suggestive” (α_1 = 1.00, α_2 = .78).

Self-touching. Suggestiveness of self-touching was coded on three levels. If she put her hand(s) on her breast(s), buttock(s), or genital, the self-touching was “extremely suggestive”. If she put her hands on any areas other than those listed above, then the self-touching was “slightly suggestive”. If the person *intentionally* touched her clothes, it was also regarded as “slightly suggestive”. If there was no self-touching at all in the photo, it was coded as “not present” (α_1 = .91, α_2 = .83).

Cuteness. Cuteness could be expressed by cute facial expressions, cute acts, and/or cute

selfie stickers. Cute facial expressions were present if she was (a) making a duck face (kissing pout); (b) sticking out her tongue; (c) closing one or both of her eyes; (d) pressing her lips; or (e) raising her eyebrows. Cute acts were present if the person was (a) making a “V” hand gesture, finger heart gesture, and/or other cute hand gestures; (b) covering her mouth with *cute* objects; or (c) covering one or both of her eyes with hands, arms, other body parts, and/or *cute* objects.

A cute selfie sticker was defined as tiny little virtual objects created by selfie apps and attached to a person’s selfies to make a person look cute. A sticker only containing texts were not treated as a cute selfie sticker. Filters were also distinguished from cute selfie stickers.

Cuteness was coded on seven levels: “not present” (0 point), “only cute facial expressions” (1 point), “only cute acts” (1 point), “only cute selfie stickers” (1 point), “both cute facial expressions and cute hand gestures” (2 points), “cute selfie stickers and one of the two: facial expressions and acts” (2 points), and “all three: facial expressions, hand gestures, and selfie stickers” (3 points). For cuteness, Krippendorff’s $\alpha_1 = .75$, $\alpha_2 = .77$.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Among the 250 selfies of White women selected from Twitter, 90 (36.0 %) were from the U.S., 55 (22.0 %) from the U.K., 18 (7.2 %) from Canada, 12 (4.8 %) from Australia, 2 (.80%) were from Ireland and 2 from New Zealand, and only 1 (.40%) was from South Africa. 70 (28%) did not specify their location.

Shot Size

H1 stated that selfies of White women had more body shots than Chinese women. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the correlation between ethnicity and shot size. The relationship was significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = 4.20$, $p = .040$. The results indicated that

White women post more body shots than Chinese women. H1 was supported.

H2 (a) said that there were more incomplete facial selfies in White women’s selfies than in those of Chinese women. Before data analysis, “incomplete with the focus on face” and “incomplete with the focus on body” were combined into “incomplete facial selfies”. “Headshots” and “body shots” were recoded into “complete facial selfies”. To examine the relationship between ethnicity and the number of incomplete facial selfies, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The correlation was significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = 8.65$, $p = .003$. However, as can be seen in Table 1, the direction was the opposite: there were significantly more incomplete facial selfies among Chinese women than White women (See Table 1).

H2 (b) stated that White women on Twitter took more mirror selfies than Chinese women on Weibo. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the differences. Results showed that the relationship was not significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = .62$, $p = .430$. White women did not take more mirror selfies than Chinese women. In fact, Chinese women took more mirror selfies than White women; the correlation was not significant, though.

H3 stated that White women take more body-shots selfies than headshots. A chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated to compare the occurrences of body- and head-shots among White women’s selfies on Twitter with hypothesized occurrence. Occurrence of the two types of selfies was unequally distributed, $X^2(1, N = 250) = 104.98$, $p < .001$. There were significantly more head-shot selfies than body-shot selfies among White women (See Table 1). H3 was supported.

Body Exposure

H4 stated that White women’s selfies on Twitter displayed a higher level of body exposure in terms of (a) cleavage/breasts, (b) midriff, (c) buttock, and (d) thigh than Chinese

women’s selfies on Weibo.

To test H4 (a), a chi-square test of independence was run. The correlation was significant, $X^2(2, N = 500) = 43.41$, $p < .001$. White women displayed a significantly higher level of cleavage/breasts exposure than Chinese women on Weibo. See Table 2.

H4 (d): For thigh, some categories had expected count less than 5. To meet the prerequisite for a chi-square test, “slightly visible” and “completely visible” were collapsed into “visible”. Then a chi-square test of independence was conducted to test H4 (d). The relationship between ethnicity and thigh exposure was not significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = .22$, $p = .640$. Therefore, White women on Twitter were not more likely to expose their thighs than Chinese women on Weibo were. See Table 2.

Chi-square tests of independence were not applicable to H4 (b) and H4 (c) because some categories had expected count less than 5 even after combining “slightly visible” and “completely visible”. Therefore, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. To do so, for both “midriff” and “buttock”, “not visible” was assigned to 0 point; “slightly visible”, 1 point; and “completely visible”, 2 points.

H4 (b): To examine the relationship between ethnicity and midriff exposure, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. Given a violation of Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances, $F (1, 498) = 38.94$, $p < .001$, a *t*-test not assuming homogeneous variance was calculated. This test was found to be statistically significant, $t (282.28) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, $d = .27$. White women on Twitter ($M = .08$, $SD = 0.34$) exhibited a higher degree of body exposure in terms of midriff in their selfies than Chinese women on Weibo ($M = .01$, $SD = .09$). See Table 4.

H4 (c) said that White women had a higher degree of body exposure in terms of buttock. The result was not statistically significant, $t (498) = .43$, $p = .669$, $d = .04$. White women on

Twitter (M = .03, SD = .23) did not have a higher degree of body exposure in terms of buttock in their selfies than Chinese women on Weibo (M = .02, SD = .19). H4 (c) is rejected. See Table 4.

In sum, compared to selfies of Chinese women on Weibo, White women on Twitter exhibited a significantly higher degree of body exposure in terms of cleavage and midriff, but not in term of buttock nor thigh (See Table 2 and Table 4).

Sexual Suggestiveness

H5 stated White women on Twitter exhibited a higher degree of sexual suggestiveness in terms of (a) hair, (b) pose, and (c) self-touching. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to test these hypotheses.

H5 (a): The correlation between ethnicity and hair suggestiveness was significant, $X^2(2, N = 500) = 32.17$, $p < .001$. White women displayed a significantly higher level sexual suggestiveness through hair display than Chinese women. H5 (a) is supported.

H5 (b): The relationship between ethnicity and level of sexual suggestiveness of pose was also significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = 8.51$, $p = .004$. White women displayed a higher level sexual suggestiveness via pose than Chinese women. H5 (b) is supported.

H5 (c): Some categories of self-touching had expected count less than 5. To test H5 (c), “slightly suggestive” and “extremely suggestive” were combined into “sexually suggestive”. The relationship was significant, $X^2(1, N = 500) = 6.85$, $p = .009$. However, the direction was the opposite: Chinese women exhibited more sexual suggestiveness through self-touching than White women did. H5 (c) is rejected.

In sum, compared to Chinese women on Weibo, White women on Twitter exhibited a higher degree of sexual suggestiveness through hair and posture, but a lower degree of suggestiveness in terms of self-touching (See Table 3).

Sexualization

H6 claimed that White women’s selfies on Twitter showed a higher degree of sexualization in terms of (a) body exposure, (b) sexual suggestiveness, and (c) these two measurements combined. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to answer these questions.

For variables under *body exposure*, namely, cleavage, midriff, buttock, and thigh, category of “not visible” was assigned to 0 point; “slightly visible”, 1 point; “completely visible”, 2 points. Degree of body exposure of each selfie was the sum of its scores on each of these four categories. For hair and self-touching under *sexual suggestiveness*, “not suggestive” was assigned to 0 point; “slightly suggestive”, 1 point; “extremely suggestive”, 2 points. For pose, “not suggestive” was assigned to 0 point, and “suggestive” was assigned to 2 point. Degree of sexual suggestiveness of an individual selfie was calculated by summing its corresponding scores on each of these three suggestiveness categories. Degrees of body exposure and sexual suggestiveness were then summed to produce the *sexualization* score.

H6 (a): Given a violation of Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances, F (1, 498) = 69.57, $p < .001$, a *t*-test not assuming homogeneous variance was calculated. This test was found to be statistically significant, t (390.87) = 5.87, $p < .001$, $d = .52$. The results indicated that White women on Twitter ($M = .76$, $SD = 1.18$) exhibited a higher degree of body exposure than Chinese women on Weibo ($M = .26$, $SD = .66$). H6 (a) is supported.

H6 (b): Given a violation of Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances, $F(1,498) = 8.43$, $p = .004$. a *t*-test not assuming homogeneous variance was calculated. The relationship was statistically significant, t (491.11) = 4.05, $p < .001$, $d = .36$. The results indicated that White women on Twitter ($M = 1.26$, $SD = .84$) exhibited a higher level of sexual suggestiveness than Chinese women on Weibo ($M = .97$, $SD = .75$). Thus, H6 (b) is supported.

H6 (c): Given a violation of Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances, F (1, 498) = 20.85, $p < .001$, a t-test not assuming homogeneous variance was calculated. The relationship was significant, t (429.32) = 6.48, $p < .001$, $d = .58$. White women ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.61$) on Twitter exhibited a significantly higher degree of sexualization in their selfies than Chinese women ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 1.05$) on Weibo. H6 (c) is supported.

Therefore, in terms of body exposure, sexual suggestiveness and the two measurements combined, White women’s Twitter selfies showed a higher level of sexualization than Chinese women’s Weibo selfies (See Table 4).

Cuteness

RQ1 asked whether Chinese women in their selfies on Weibo showed a higher degree of cuteness than White women did on Twitter. An independent samples t-test was conducted to answer this question. The results showed that although Chinese women ($M = .51$, $SD = .75$) exhibited a higher degree of cuteness than White women ($M = .41$, $SD = .62$), the difference was not significant, t (479.69) = -1.56, $p = .119$, $d = .14$. See Table 4.

Cuteness scores were skewed to the right, so Mann-Whitney Test (2 independent samples) was also conducted. The test results also indicated that Chinese women ($Mdn = .00$) did not exhibit a significantly higher level of cuteness than White women ($Mdn = .00$), U = 29837.00, $p = .302$, $r = .04$.

Social Media Performance

RQ2 (a) and (b) asked whether posts of a higher degree of sexualization and cuteness attracted more replies, retweets, and favorites on social media. Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess these relationships.

When the size of followers and the degree of cuteness were controlled, results showed

that on Twitter, neither the number of replies (r = .03, p = .62), retweets (r = .12, p = .07), nor favorites (r = -.06, p = .33) was significantly correlated with the level of sexualization. On Weibo, the degree of sexualization did not correlate with the number of favorites (r = -.09, p = .17); however, it was significantly positively related to the number of replies (r = .13, p = .04) and significantly negatively correlated with the number of retweets (r = -.16, p = .01). When follower volume and the degree of sexualization were controlled for, results showed that on either platform, the degree of cuteness was not correlated with the size of replies, retweets and favorites.

In sum, significant correlations were only found on Weibo: self-sexualization was positively correlated with the number of replies and negatively correlated with the number of retweets (See Table 5).

Discussion

The present study compared White and Chinese women’s selfies in term of shot size (headshot versus body-shot), body exposure (cleavage, midriff, buttock, and thigh), sexual suggestiveness (hair, pose, and self-touching), and cuteness. Body exposure and sexual suggestiveness together comprised sexualization. The results showed that compared to Chinese women, White women took more body-shot selfies, and displayed a higher level of self-sexualization (both explicitly through body exposure and implicitly through sexual suggestiveness). Differences in the level of cuteness between White and Chinese women were not significant.

Head versus Body Shots

The finding that White women took more body-shot selfies than Chinese women supported the theory of cultural beauty ideals. After their content analysis of U.S. and Asian

women’s magazine ads, Frith et al. (2005) argued that beauty of women’s body in the U.S. was constructed in terms of the “body”, whereas in Singapore and Taiwan the defining factor of beauty is an attractive face. The results of the present study not only supported this argument but also extended it: it holds true for selfies. Also, although there was a well-documented trend that Asian women had been incorporating Western beauty standards, for example, to be thin (Jung & Lee, 2006; Luo, Parish, Laumann, 2005: Leung, Lam, & Sze, 2000), they, Chinese women at least, still value their faces more.

Although White women post more body-shot selfies, they did not post more mirror selfies than Chinese women. In fact, Chinese women took more mirror selfies than White women; the difference was not significant, though.

The study indicated, however, that for White women alone, they took significantly more headshot selfies than body-shot selfies. This finding offered support for the speculation that profile pictures of women in the Western societies were mostly headshots (Fardouly et al., 2015). This indicated that the desire to present the idealized selves is constrained by the technology people use. After all, it is difficult to capture the whole body in a selfie.

Self-Sexualization: Body Exposure and Sexual Suggestiveness

The results demonstrated that overall, White women’s selfies scored higher on the level of self-sexualization than selfies of Chinese women. This is consistent with the finding that sexual appeal in ads portraying women was more popular in the U.S. than in East Asian cultures (Frith et al., 2005).

Specifically, results showed White women on Twitter exhibited a higher level of body exposure in terms of cleavage and midriff, but not in terms of buttock or thigh. Given that on both platforms, headshots significantly outnumbered body shots, it was not surprising that the

level of body exposure in terms of buttock and thigh did not differ significantly between the two groups. After all, a woman could not expose her buttock or legs in a selfie featuring her upper body.

In terms of sexual suggestiveness, White women exhibited a significantly higher level of suggestiveness through hair display and posing. Chinese women showed a significantly higher degree of suggestiveness through self-touching. In retrospect, however, this result made sense. In the codebook of Ramsey and Horan (2018), any sort of self-touching was regarded coded as “suggestive”. The coders of the present study noticed that many Chinese women, when taking a selfie, tended to touch and surround their chin with fingers (usually using thumb and index finger, or index finger and middle finger). This type of touching, however, was not sexually suggestive: they did this to make their face look smaller and cute. Future research on Chinese women’s selfies should be aware of this and distinguish between “sexually suggestive self-touching” and “non-suggestive self-touching”.

After (a) exposure of cleavage, midriff, buttock and thigh was collapsed into a single index of body exposure, (b) suggestiveness of hair, pose and self-touching collapsed into the index of sexual suggestiveness, and (c) body exposure and sexual suggestiveness collapsed into self-sexualization, results showed that White women scored significantly higher on each of these three indexes, indicating that White women’s selfies were significantly more sexualized than those of Chinese women.

If only White women were considered, the results showed that in each of the seven measures, namely cleavage, midriff, buttock, thigh, hair, pose, and self-touching, categories of lower exposure or lower sexual suggestiveness occurred significantly more frequently than those of higher degrees. This result was consistent with Ramsey and Horan (2018) finding that rate of

sexualization of photographs posted by U.S. women was relatively low. This finding, however, should be treated with caution since the author formulated this research question after data was collected.

Cuteness

Although cuteness was thought to be more popular among women in East Asia than in the Western societies, the results of the present study showed that this was not the case. Selfies of Chinese women did score higher on cuteness levels than selfies of White women, but the differences were not statistically significant, indicating that cuteness in selfies was not unique to Asian women.

Social Media Performance

Overall, the results showed that for Twitter, when the number of followers was controlled, neither the self-sexualization score nor the level of cuteness was associated with the number the replies, retweets or favorites. This implied that more sexualized or more “cutefied” selfies did not attract more attention on Twitter. A possible explanation is that on Twitter, what attracts attention was being “beautiful”, rather than being “sexy” nor “cute”. This explanation calls for future research.

Weibo had a different story. Although cuteness did not have any impact on social media performances, the level of sexualization in the selfies was significantly positively associated with the number replies and significantly negatively correlated with the size of retweets. This implies that among Chinese Weibo users, more sexualized selfies generated significantly more comments but significantly fewer retweets. On the one hand, sexualized pictures are more popular, attracting more discussions among viewers. On the other hand, people are reluctant to retweet posts with sexualized photos. One explanation was that sex remains a sensitive topic in China

(Chow, 2017) so it is socially unacceptable to retweet, or disseminate, sexualized images.

Limitations

The study was among its first to analyze and compare selfies of women from different cultures form the perspective of self-sexualization and cuteness. However, some limitations still exist. First, although Twitter and China’s Weibo were comparable, neither one was primarily used for sharing pictures. Instagram and Snapchat in Anglosphere countries, and WeChat in China are more popular as photo-sharing platforms. That said, it is difficult, or even impossible, to conduct random sampling on these platforms.

Second, the definition of “sexualization” in terms of body exposure might vary across cultures. For example, exposing cleavage moderately might be considered normal in the Western world, whereas it would be considered sexualized in China. Sexual suggestiveness and cuteness had even more cultural nuances. For example, making duck faces were considered slightly sexualized, but it was largely considered cute in Chinese contexts. These cultural differences make comparisons difficult.

Third, no previous research has operationalized the degree of cuteness; the present study was the first. Pioneering as it is, the operationalization provided here was not without drawbacks. Judgments on cuteness of a selfie were subjective. Decisions in the present study were made based on a limited number of manifestations (facial expressions, acts and selfie stickers); however, cuteness might be expressed by ways not listed in the codebook. Future research can conduct focus groups and come up with a comprehensive list of representations of cuteness.

Fourth, coders in the present study did not reach desirable intercoder reliability for sexual suggestiveness of mouth and eyes, which were included in previous studies (Ramsey & Horan, 2018; Ruckel & Hill, 2017). These two variables were then dropped from the final analysis. This

might have influenced the overall level of self-sexualization. Future research should strive to reach acceptable ICR for these two variables.

Fifth, not all selfies on Twitter and Weibo posted in 2018 were retrieved. This is because 1) not all selfies were hashtaged with “#selfie(s)” since some people might have hashtaged their selfies with “#me”, “#myself”, “#beautiful”, etc.; 2) some Twitter and Weibo accounts were set as “private” and therefore selfies by these users could not be accessed from public API.

Lastly, distinguishing between Caucasian and Hispanic women on Twitter was challenging. Some selfies of Hispanic women might have been included and selfies of Caucasian women excluded. Also challenging was deciding on the selfie-takers’ age. In addition, decisions on whether a user’s profile was highly commercialized were also difficult. As the material was prepared by the first coder alone, decisions might have suffered from subjectivity.

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Appendix A

(a) It was a still image (rather than a video);

(b) The person was a woman (If uncertainty about gender arose, decisions were made based on users’ self-select on their profile page);

(c) It had only one subject. Selfies featuring two or more people were not excluded. For the same reason, a selfie taken with billboards portraying celebrities were also excluded;

(d) The photo was taken by the subject herself, i.e., not by others (For this reason, selfies taken by a timer were excluded.);

(e) The selfie taker and the profile owner were the same person. For this reason, if a person shared a selfie of others, the picture was not included in analysis;

(f) Nipples and/or vulva were not exposed (censorship took time and sometimes failed to identify sensitive images);

(g) It contained body parts other than just hands/feet;

(h) The subject’s age, as shown on her profile page, was above 13;

(i) It was not for horror’s purpose;

(j) It was not taken with a landmark since selfie with a landmark extremely restricted the purpose and the way how the person presented herself;

(k) It was not taken for comparing oneself to a piece of artwork, i.e., selfies by Google’s Arts & Culture app were excluded.

Appendix B

Table 1

Shot size, faceless selfies and mirror selfies among White and Chinese women

	White (n = 250)		*Chinese (n = 250)*		X^2
	Total	*% of total*	*Total*	*% of total*	
Shot size					4.20*
Head shot	206	82.4%	233	89.2%	
Body shot	44	17.6%	27	10.8%	
Incomplete facial					8.65**
Incomplete	9	3.6%	27	10.8%	
Complete	241	96.4%	223	89.2%	
Mirror selfie					.62
Yes	19	7.6%	25	10.0%	
No	231	92.4%	225	90.0%	

X^2 = chi-square value: $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

a. Including "faceless with the focus on face"

b. Including "Faceless with the focus on body"

Table 2

Body exposure for White and Chinese women's selfies

	White (n = 250)		*Chinese (n = 250)*		X^2
	Total	*% of total*	*Total*	*% of total*	
Cleavage					43.41***
Not visible and no	153	61.2%	210	84.0%	
Not visible but with	45	18.0%	32	12.8%	
Visible	52	20.8%	8	3.2%	
Midriff					N/A
Not visible	237	94.8%	248	99.2%	
Slightly visible	7	2.8%	2	0.8%	
Completely visible	6	2.4%	0	0.0%	
Buttock					N/A
Not visible	246	98.4%	247	98.8%	
Slightly visible	1	0.4%	1	0.4%	
Completely visible	3	1.2%	2	0.8%	
Thigh					.22
Not visible	239	95.6%	242	96.8%	
Visible	11	4.4%	8	3.2%	
(Slightly visible	8	3.2%	7	2.8%	
Completely visible	3	1.2%	1	0.4%)	

X^2 = chi-square value: $^{*}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3

Sexual Suggestiveness for White and Chinese women's selfies

	White (n = 250)		*Chinese (n = 250)*		X^2
	Total	*% of total*	*Total*	*% of total*	
Hair					32.17***
Not sexually suggestive	42	16.8%	97	38.8%	
Slightly suggestive	196	78.4%	149	59.6%	
Extremely suggestive	12	4.8%	4	1.6%	
Pose					8.51**
Not suggestive	228	91.2%	244	97.6%	
Suggestive	22	8.8%	6	2.4%	
Self-touching					6.85**
Not present	203	81.2%	177	70.8%	
Suggestive	47	18.8%	73	29.2%	
(Slightly suggestive	43	17.2%	72	28.8%	
Extremely suggestive	4	1.6%	1	0.4%)	

X^2 = chi-square value: $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 4

Body exposure, sexual suggestiveness, self-sexualization, and cuteness for White and China women's selfies

	White (n = 250)		*Chinese (n = 250)*		
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t-value*
Body exposure	.76	1.18	.26	.66	5.87***
Midriff	.08	0.34	.01	.09	3.02 **
Buttock	.03	.23	.02	.19	.43
Sexual suggestiveness	1.26	.84	.97	.75	4.05***
Sexualization	2.02	1.61	1.23	1.05	6.48***
Cuteness	.51	.75	.41	.62	-1.56

t-value: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5

Correlation between self-sexualization and cuteness, and social media performance

	Reply	*Retweet*	*Favorite*
White			
Self-sexualization	.03	.12	.06
Cuteness	.09	.08	.09
Chinese			
Self-sexualization	.13*	-.16*	-.09
Cuteness	.05	.06	.07

Note: *$p < .05$