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The Sexualization of Females on Weibo and Its Interactive Influences on Chinese Young Females

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Abstract

Discussion under the topic of sexualization is mainly focused on western society while nearly no academic exploration has extended the concept of sexualization into the Chinese context. Thus, this research aims to explore the sexualization of females in Chinese social media platform Weibo and its interactive (mutually reinforcing) effects on Chinese young females.

A qualitative approach was applied in this research, using content analysis to examine and interpret the photos posted by Chinese young females on Weibo in association with sexualization based on framing theory, and semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth insight into the effects of sexualization on these young female Weibo users in the framework of cultivation theory and the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy, meanwhile understand their personal experience and feelings towards sexualization. The results indicated that sexualization among young females exists in Weibo, and the evaluation approach used to examine media sexualization in the western context can be applied in the Chinese context. Similar to that in the western countries, when presenting themselves through photos/images on Weibo, sexualization is commonly manifested in a variety of ways among the Chinese young female Weibo users, they mostly are exposed to and create self-presentation to somewhat less overt but sexually suggestive manners by cropping, editing, selecting certain scenes or angles, augmented by the outfits and poses to create the sexualized frames in the photos. In addition, it is found that the cumulative exposure to sexualized peer self-presentation on Weibo had cultivating and mutually reinforcing effects on these young Chinese females' perception and behavior in terms of beauty standard, peer norms, self-concept (self-esteem, self-image, and self-evaluation), and desire to engage in self-sexualization, both strengthening and undermining their self-identity.

Keyword: Sexualization, Females, Weibo

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the discourse regarding sexualization has been ever-increasingly drawing attention from society. Sexualization refers to the value that focuses only on a person's appearance or sexual appeal with a standard of physical attractiveness to being sexy that excludes all other characteristics. In other words, the person is sexually objectified rather than viewed as a person with the capacity for independent action (Lamb & Koven, 2019). Sexualization and the media have always been closely interrelated, that is, as found by previous studies, in the context of modern communication, sexualization can be regarded as a characteristic of both humans and culture, especially of which in the media's representation. In the process of the sexualization of culture, media plays an important role as the media facilitates the generation and dissemination of sexualization in culture, as a result, the sexualization of culture and media has caused the sexualization of people, especially young women, which has also indicated gender asymmetry in the representation of sexualization in the media (Li & Lin, 2015).

Today, the relationship between social media and society is symbiotic, in which social media plays a significant role in both shaping and reflecting society and culture. Most people, especially the younger generation these days cannot live without social media, and social media becomes the number one tool in their process of sharing and exchanging information and ideas, through which young people internalize the values, beliefs, and attitudes as they perceived.

Over the past decade, Weibo (short for Sina Weibo) has undoubtedly become the pioneering and leading social media platform in China. As of October 2020, the monthly active users of Weibo have exceeded 321 million (Lai, 2020). It is often labeled as the Chinese Twitter for similarities in their functions and social roles.

It is undeniable that social media plays a vital role in the shape of all aspects of society, including sexualization which is now a global phenomenon worthy of discussion. Despite the concept of sexualization being relatively new as compared to other media-related issues, in the western academia, it has been brought up for decades, notably with the prevalence of social media. Moreover, different social media platforms share commonalities and differences in terms of the ways in which young women display sexualized content. For example, one study showed that young women posted more sexualized photos on Instagram than on Facebook. Nevertheless, more sexualized photos were more likely to gain more likes and followers than less sexualized photos on both Instagram and Facebook (Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Apart from the presence of sexualization on social media, empirical research evidence also showed that social media along with the presence of peers will greatly reinforce the idea of sexualization among young girls, which will lead to a series of consequences in association with exposure to sexualized content, such as body dissatisfaction, greater self-objectification /sexualization, negative sexual beliefs, poorer mental health, etc., as well as stereotypes towards females in society and culture (Ward, 2016; Lamb & Koven, 2019). On the other hand, social media has also played a positive role in young female's agenda of "sexual empowerment" in which they use social media such as Instagram and Twitter to engage in the discourse of topics involving sexualization and sex education, and activism against sexual violence (Gill, 2012).

Thus, it can be seen that there has been a substantial amount of research in relation to the phenomenon of sexualization in western social media, however, the notion of sexualization in Chinese academia still remains nascent. Ergo, it would be meaningful to delve into the topic of sexualization in the Chinese context.

Objectives of Study

1) To assess the sexualization of Chinese young females on the representative Chinese social media platform Weibo;

2) To explore the interactive (mutually reinforcing) influences of exposure and creation of sexualized presentation of young females on Weibo in terms of perception of beauty stand-ards, peer norms, self-concept, sexual attitude /value of Chinese young female Weibo users;

3) To understand young females' motives and intentions in presenting sexualized content of themselves on Weibo.

Research Methodology

On the basis of the overall concept and objectives of this research, which aim to give an in-depth exploration of the research topic, a qualitative approach will be applied to collect information and data. In this research, two qualitative research methods will be used, they are content /document analysis to assess the photo posts by Chinese young females on Weibo with respect to sexualization, and semi-structured in-depth interviews consisting of both close-ended and open-ended questions to elaborate on the participants' personal experience and feelings towards sexualization on social media.

In content analysis, the data is collected from the photos posted on Weibo following the afore-mentioned criteria to rate and assess the extent and interpret the definition of the sexualization of young females on Weibo. The photos are individually observed and coded. To determine the definition and extent of sexualization in each photo, a coding system consisting of 12 categories developed by Hatton and Trautner (2011) will be used as a modified version in accordance with the current research following a qualitative approach. They are 1) Clothing/Nudity, 2) Breast/Chest, 3) Shoulders/Back, 4) Abdomen, 5) Hips/Buttocks, 6) Legs/Thighs, 7) Mouth, 8) Eyes, 9) Head vs. Body shot, 10) Sexual pose, 11) Touch, 12) Sexual role play. Each selected photo will be ob-served and classified into each category based on the framing theory, particularly visual framing.

The interview approach and questions for participants are as follows: first, they will be shown one photo previously sampled for content analysis, this photo should not be of the subject of in-terviews. Then, they are asked questions including "How do you feel about this photo?" "Do you think the girl in the photo is pretty /attractive? How would you describe the style of this photo?" "Is it the common style of picture you see of girls your own age? / "Do you think this kind of image is popular among your peers?" "From your previous experience, is this type of photo likely to be popular and gain a large number of likes on Weibo?" "Do you follow Weibo accounts that post photos similar to this one?". After that, they will be shown one photo of themselves they posted on Weibo. The following questions will be then asked: "How do you feel about the look of yourself in this image?" "Do you think it's somewhat similar to the photo previously shown to you? If so, in what

aspect(s) are they similar?". These questions are followed by a question that leads to a more general discussion regarding the topic of study, that is "Do you feel these two photos somewhat presented you and her in a sexually appealing fashion? Or how would you describe the style?". Then, several questions will be asked which serve as the guidelines to answer research questions, they are "Do you always present yourself with photos in this style on Weibo?" "What motivates you to present yourself in this kind of way?" "Are you inspired by anyone or anything to present yourself in this kind of way?" "How do you feel about yourself when you present your photos on Weibo?" "When you receive likes and compliments from others by presenting yourself with photos in this style/image, will it motivate you to post more photos similar to this?" "Do you think the image you present of yourself on Weibo, such as in the photos you post, is consistent with what you actually are like in daily life?" "Does seeing your female peers on Weibo being presented or presenting themselves in this fashion positively/negatively influence your perception about yourself? In what ways?" "Do you consider being attractive /appealing as a priority to you and other fellow women?".

Target Groups

The target of this research is young adult female Weibo users who belong to the Generation Z, aged between 18~25. Gen Z is the first generation to live their entire lives or to grow up with access to the internet, and they are considered the main force of social media use (Turner, 2015). Moreover, previous research has indicated young females are the most frequent target of sexualization, yet, the majority of research only conducted in the western context, thus, examining this phenomenon in Chinese society is of significance.

Results of Research
Content Analysis

The coding process was based on the RQ1 and framing theory through which 100 photos, as previously stated in the research methodology, were selected to identify and solidify the definition of "sexualization" to the research subjects, the Chinese Gen Z female population on Weibo. The photos were then individually observed and thematically classified into 12 groups to decipher the way the visual frame (eg. angle, highlight, focus, emphasis) in the selected photo was formed based on a coding system developed by Hatton and Trautner (2011). The elements in each photo were listed out seriatim, then, were placed into one of the 12 coding categories if that particular element was involved in the photo.

Table 1. Summary of Results of Content Analysis of the 100 photos, the numbers of photos classified under each categories were summarized in the following table:

Short shorts/mini skirt	29	Legs/Thighs	34	body shots	37
Slip dress	18	Hips/Buttocks	28	head shots	8
Sleepwear/underwear/lingerie	12	Breast/Chest	25	head & body	55
Swimwear	11	Shoulders/back	18	Sexual pose	87
Off-the-shoulder dress	10	Abdomen	15	Sexually suggestive	79
Backless dress	9	Eyes	15	Explicitly related to sexual activity	8
Tank top	8	Mouth	12	Touch	14
Undressed	3			Sexual role play	10

Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were led by sample photos previously used in the content analysis (one of the participant herself and one of another girl) and participants were asked to answer relevant questions after viewing the photos and later extended to a general discussion with respect to the research topic.

Influences of the exposure and creation of sexualized presentation on Weibo
Perception of beauty standards and peer norms:

From the results of interviews, it was found that the target group's perception of beauty standards and perceived peer norms shared overall commonalities which were related to the exposure and creation of sexualized presentations on Weibo in association with the other examined factors which are self-concept and sexual attitude/value.

According to the questions asking participants to give their feelings/first impressions in terms of the photo which their peers presented of themselves on Weibo and describe the style and image the photo conveys, they overall described it as sexy, hot, pretty, bold, trendy, etc. 7 out of all 9 participants used the word "la mei" which means "hot girl/spice girl" and some revealed desire to become this type of "hot girl". In addition, the majority of interviewees acknowledged that this is the common style and image of girls their age on social media including Weibo, and normally will increase the likelihood of receiving a large number of likes on Weibo, also they follow similar accounts to varying degrees, and according to the background information previously collected, it was found that the high frequency of Weibo use (all of them use it on a daily basis) and posting photos of themselves (more frequently as compared to the other 2),

and their most viewed types of content (the categories they provided will possibly give them greater chances of exposing to content containing portrayal of peers) has intensified their degree of acknowledgment. Some stated the overall image/style is commonly seen in both the posts of their friends and other accounts such as influencers while others expressed it is more common for influencer accounts.

Self-concept:

In terms of the self-concept, it was found that participants share similarities and differences when exposed to and creating sexualized portrayals on the target media platform Weibo.

Based on the questions asking participants to give definitions and share their feelings about the look of themselves in the selected photo posted on Weibo (self-image), the majority of them did not give a clear definition or gave descriptions not using the similar words they used to describe the girl in the other photo, rather, they tended to describe themselves with more euphemistic terms such as "good-looking", "stylish", "showing beauty", etc. When they were asked whether they acknowledged the similarities and in terms of "sexualization" with the photo previously shown to them (self-awareness, self-evaluation), most of them were vacillated in their opinions and acknowledging the sexualized elements. When interviewees were asked to share their feelings when they present those photos on Weibo (self-evaluation), they generally expressed positive feelings such as "happy" and "confident", but some also admitted to having both positive and negative experiences. Regarding the participants' perception and concept with respect to the consistency of the image they present of themselves on Weibo and their image in real daily life (ideal-self, public-self, and real-self), most of them confessed the inconsistency to varying degrees.

While participants were asked whether seeing girls their age on Weibo with the sexualized type of image and style, as assessed in this research, influence their perception about themselves (self-esteem, self-image, and self-evaluation), the majority of them acknowledged it and shared there were both positive and negative impacts.

Sexual attitude /value:

With regard to the personal attitude and value of the interviewees of appearance presentation and sexualization, they were asked to discuss for them and other girls of their age, whether they consider being attractive and appealing, and showing them on social media is the priority to them, the factors that prompt this kind of self-expression, as well as their opinions about it. The majority of the interviewees acknowledged the fact that showing personal charisma through appearance that attracts attention on social media could bring incentives to them, but all of them argued it was not and should not be the prior and central focus

Motives and intentions of sexualized self-representation on Weibo

Participants were also asked to discuss factors that motivate them to present themselves in the sexualized way assessed in the study. The factors generally include influences from influencers, self-expression, mood, and environment. In addition, participants were asked to

share the influences/inspirations they received that contributed to such a type of self-presentation on Weibo. Two third of them admitted to being inspired/influenced to a certain extent. Besides, it was examined positive and affirmative endorsements on Weibo such as receiving likes and complimentary comments will serve as a motive for them to further post more photos in the similar fashion, the majority of interviewees responded in confirmation.

Discussion

From the content analysis that assesses and defines sexualization of Chinese young female Weibo users by applying the framing theory, specifically visual framing, It was found that the evaluation approach used to examine social media sexualization in the western context can also be applied in the Chinese context, in line with what Xiao, et al. (2019) concluded that sexualization and sexual objectification is common in both western and eastern contexts. To further define the sexualization of young Chinese females on Chinese social media and identify similarities and differences of female sexualization in the Chinese social media context, the results were made comparison to two previous studies "Female Self-Sexualization in MySpace.com Personal Profile Photographs" (Hall, et al., 2012) and "Look @ Me 2.0: Self-Sexualization in Facebook Photographs, Body Surveillance and Body Image" (Ruckel & Hill, 2017), both studies were conducted in the western context and used similar assessing categories to this research. In general, similar to that in the western context, when presenting themselves through photos/images on Weibo, sexualization is commonly manifested in a variety of ways (with some being more common and some being less common) among the Chinese Gen Z young female users, while frames were used to create certain sexualized portrayals. Same as that of western countries, they tend to convey the image of self-presentation to somewhat less overt but sexually suggestive manners in terms of posing, dressing, and photo-shooting techniques, which was considered similar to a "thirst trap" defined in western social media (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Thus, it is found that the phenomenon of "thirst traps" exists not only in the western social media context but in the eastern such as Chinese social media as well.

Previous studies have pointed out social media's tremendous impact on communication that could lead to further influences on people's attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors both positively and negatively (Naslund, et al., 2016). Gen Z young adults who have been considered the main force of social media spend the most time on social media use (Coyne, et al., 2013), for which its impacts could be the strongest among them all, and consequently, they easily become the target of sexualization are influenced in terms of the perception of beauty standard and peer norms, self-concept, and sexual attitude /value as examined in this research.

In this research, almost all interviewees who were heavy users of Weibo (use on a daily basis) and favor content that gives them greater chances of exposing to the sexualized portrayal of peers gave a surprisingly concerted answer in terms of the style of their peers' image on Weibo, in which they described as "la mei" meaning hot girl/spice girl and used terms like sexy, hot, trendy, sultry that could be linked to being sexually attractive, they expressed the positive impression of the image, and acknowledge the style being the typical and popular aesthetics among girls their age

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