The Impact of Cultural Values and Gender on Chinese Young Adults in Using Social Networking Site (Renren)

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Abstract

Based on a cross-sectional survey of 416 Chinese young adults, this study examined the impact of cultural values and gender on why college students use the Chinese social networking site (Renren). This study found that interdependent self-construal can predict four motives for Chinese young adults to use Renren: socialization, entertainment, self-status seeking and information seeking. The study also found that male and female respondents significantly differ in information seeking and self-status seeking; with male adults being higher in self-status seeking and female adults higher in information seeking. Limitations and suggestions for future research are provided.

Key words: social media, Chinese social networking, Renren, & gender
As one of the most dominant products of the Internet, social media have transformed both local and global communication significantly in the past decade. Scholars suggested the Internet, along with high-speed connections, affordable technology and the availability of news programs, changed the way we communicate (Rice & Haythornthwaite, 2007). They pointed out Internet characteristics such as interactivity and digital content that allow communication to flow nearly unrestricted (Dong, Day, & Deol, 2010). Thus, individuals, young people in particular, have learned to depend heavily on social media for socialization and entertainment.

Social media have existed since the very beginning of the Internet, but mostly as message boards where people could post messages on various topics and wait for others to respond. It was MySpace in 2003 that popularized social media with its easy-to-use blogging platform and the ability to easily share music and videos among users. YouTube was established two years later, allowing individuals to share videos online. It was followed by the creation of Facebook in 2006, a social media that allows users to share music, video, photos, blogs, news stories and play interactive games on a virtual platform. Today, Facebook has more than 800 million users, making it the most popular social media platform in the world. Social Media overall has penetrated life in the United States in ways not foreseen a decade ago, as two-thirds of all adults in the United States now use social media, and nearly half of all adults say they check a social media account at least once a day (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). The functions of social media are hardly comprehended because they have dramatically altered the way we communicate, define the media, and interact with individuals and the media.

Because of its dynamic functions and power, many countries have competed with the United States, launching their own social networking site (SNS) similar to Facebook, allowing the government to offer an online experience that is closer to their citizens while also still presenting a Facebook-type of experience. For example, in Japan, the most popular social networking site is called “Mixi.” Mixi currently has more than 20 million users but is only available to those who have a Japanese cell-phone number. Foreigners who do not currently reside in Japan are not allowed to browse the site.

In China, Renren is the leading social networking site. There is limited literature on the Chinese social media, therefore it is critical for this study to fill in the gap. This study examines why Chinese young adults use the social media, and how the Chinese users are affected by their cultural values and gender in using the social media.

Literature Review

*Chinese Social Networking Site (Renren)*

Renren is the leading SNS in China. It had more than 160 million registered users in 2010, and was expected to surpass 170 million users in 2011. Much like Facebook, Renren is a real profile-based SNS like Facebook that initially was used by Chinese college students, who continue to make up the majority of users. Overseas university students, high school students, and white-collar workers are the other primary users.

Renren offers similar services as Facebook, users can design their own profile pages with a variety of choices offered free by Renren. Like Facebook, it allows mobile browsing and desktop browsing, as well as third-party applications, social games and e-commerce features. Unlike Facebook, RenRen allows more flexibility in design, thus giving a more unique user experience than Facebook. For example, among all the features of Renren, online currency and social games like Happy Farm are two of the more popular features of the SNS. In a word, Renren appears to be a copycat of Facebook, but analytically it is a hybrid SNS that takes
advantage of the U.S. original, adding new features that transform it into the Chinese-value oriented model.

**Key Motives in Using Social Media**

According to Urista, Dong & Day (2010), individuals had five motivations to use social media such as Facebook or MySpace, including “efficient communication,” “convenient communication,” “curiosity about others,” “popularity,” and “relationship formation and reinforcement” (p. 221). Ray (2007) summarized that “the websites (SNS) fulfill entertainment, information exchange, surveillance, diversion and social utility functions simultaneously.” Since Renren and Facebook have shared many similarities in technology, user characteristics and application, the current study adopted motivation measurement developed by Ray’s study (2007). The motivation categories include socialization, information seeking, entertainment and self-status seeking.

Socialization refers to maintaining existing social ties and being able to reconnect with friends from the past as social gratifications (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Kim, Sohn and Choi (2011) suggested that Eastern people seem to give more weight to social support regarding the use of SNS. Kujath (2011) found some users tend to rely on Facebook and MySpace for interpersonal communication more than face-to-face interaction, adding that SNS interaction is an extension to off-line connection. In that study, socialization motivation includes maintaining and developing online connections, gaining social support, and helping group members.

Limited to the length of the measurement, not every aspect of each motivation could be determined. As for the motivation of information seeking, studies showed that Internet use is driven more by informational and interactive motives (Eun, Yoon, & Jae, 2005). As for the case of Renren, academic information, career development information, products/services, and facts about the society were included in the investigation. Entertainment refers to the time spent on Renren to gratify needs of happiness, excitement, and novelty. Self-status seeking included peer pressure, perceptions of coolness, usefulness to other group members, group sharing inclinations, high expectation on one’s own posts, and sharing aspects of one’s life to friends.

**Cultural influence on Renren Use**

Culture shapes individuals’ beliefs, values and behaviors. With fast social media development, it is interesting to see how culture plays a role in affecting Chinese young adults to use this social networking site. Intercultural communication scholars often focus on a number of cultural constructs when investigating cultural influence in a global context: individualism and collectivism, low context and high context, independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal. Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that the perspective of independent self-construal views an individual as an independent entity with a focus on individual feelings, cognitions and motivations. They suggested that the perspective of interdependent self-construal views an individual as an interdependent entity with an emphasis on conformity and relationships with others.

Hall (1976) developed the concept of high and low context in intercultural communication. He explained that individuals who use high context communication tend to find the information in a physical context or are internalized in communicators’ minds. While people who use low context communication tend to put the information of communication into the message itself. Hofstede (2001) helped define both conceptual and operational definitions of individualism and collectivism which are critical to understanding of cultural differences. He emphasized that the dimension of individualism and collectivism can be viewed as a relationship
between individuals and collectivity in a society. These cultural values significantly shape people’s beliefs, values and behaviors. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1998) indicated that people from individualistic countries tend to use low context with a direct and explicit communication style while people from collectivistic countries tend to use high context with an indirect and implicit communication style. Intercultural communication researchers believed that people from high individualistic societies also have independent self-construals while people from collectivistic societies have interdependent self-construals. It is expected these different self-construals will affect individual’s social media use.

Gender Differences

Gender has played important roles in adopting technology. From the telephone to the mobile phone, computer to the Internet, males and females use technologies for different purposes and in various ways. With historical analogues, it is very likely that SNS can shape and be shaped by different gender of their users.

Joinson (2008) found that, in general, women use more SNS than men. Moreover, female participants in a multi-stage study conducted in 2007 scored higher on scales for social connection and posting of photographs. In Thelwall’s study (2008) focusing on using MySpace, it was found that both genders have more female friends than male friends and all members tend to choose more female friends in their Top 8 list. In Thelwall’s later study (2009) on homophily in MySpace, it was pointed out that women are simply more effective at using social network sites because they are able to control positive emotion.

Men and women use the Internet differently, although females play more important roles in the digital world. Women use it as a productivity tool while men are primarily engaged in downloading software, experimenting with new technology, and using it as a form of entertainment. Studies suggest that digital mainstream and social networking sites are central to women’s Internet experience.

Studies indicated that nearly 56 percent of adult women said they used the Internet to stay in touch with people, compared to 46 percent of adult men. When looking specifically at the social networking category, it becomes even clearer how important this activity is for women online. In North America, 9 out of 10 female Internet users visited a social network site in April 2010. Globally, women spent an average of 16.3 percent of their online time on social networks in April 2010, compared to only 11.7 percent for men. The increase over the past year showed the growing importance of social networking sites to women’s online experience. Research suggests the gender impact on social network use and its experience tends to have a significant impact on social interaction and individual development.

It is expected that gender may have an impact on people’s using SNS. Men and women use online social networking sites at different rates and for different purposes. Since the research for gender difference in Chinese social networking sites are limited, almost all aforementioned research was conducted in the United States. SNS in China may not be exactly the same as those in the United States, but some of the approaches will be valid ways to analyze the research question.

Based on the review of literature on intercultural communication, gender, and Chinese social media usage, this study suggests that there is a significant impact of cultural values and gender on Chinese young adults using social media. Therefore, two research questions are proposed as follows:

RQ 1: What is the impact of independent and interdependent self-construal on motivating Chinese young adults to use Renren?
RQ 2: How do Chinese male and female young adults differ in using Renren?

Methods

Sample
A total of 529 questionnaires were distributed with a response rate at 94.5%. However, some data were excluded because of data quality concern. The final data set came to 416.

Procedures
A four-section questionnaire was used in the study. The questionnaire was translated from English to Chinese by the researcher and overviewed by another Chinese graduate student to make sure accurate and appropriate information was conveyed to the participants. It was distributed in two waves: an electronic-version survey – SurveyMonkey and paper-version survey to college students in Southern and Northern China. The questionnaire was constructed according to the tailored design method (Dillman, 2000). Such interference factors as color indication, and unnecessary photo insertions were avoided. The design of the electronic questionnaire strictly follows the principle that a participant would not get any indication from the survey designer simply because of the appearance of web survey. Links to the survey were sent to the participants through e-mails. Participants could complete the survey when they had Internet access.

In the second wave, questionnaires were distributed to college students at a university in Southern China as well as to undergraduates of a university in Northern China. Convenience sampling was used and group-administered surveys were conducted in class.

Measurement
The first section in the questionnaire included 10 major services Renren provides. Participants were required to rate their level of agreement with each specific service, including posting photos, writing articles about oneself, reading text-only articles, updating status, sharing music, watching video, playing mini-games with friends, reading articles which have illustrations, finding idols’ information, and finding professional organizations.

The second section listed 20 statements adopted from a study (Ray, 2007) about Renren use. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with specific reasons for using Renren, including socializing (e.g., to get peer support from others), entertainment (e.g., to kill time when I have nothing else to do), self-status seeking (e.g., because I feel peer pressure to participate), information seeking (e.g., to get academic information or do research).

The third section was constructed to investigate participants’ self-construal. The measurement was adapted from Gudykunst et al. (1996). The ten statements of measuring self-construal included, “feeling emotionally connected with others is an important part of my self-definition,” “My family and close relatives are important to who I am,” “I often consult my close friends for advice before acting,” etc. Participants were asked about their level of agreement (4, strongly agree; 1, strongly disagree.) on ten Statements. The fourth section is about demographic information of participants, including gender, age, years in using Renren, and frequency of usage.

Data Analysis
Collected data were entered manually into Microsoft Excel. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. First, descriptive statistics was conducted to get demographic information of the participants. Reliability test and regression analysis were utilized for answering research question 1. Then, Chi-square analysis and t-test were used for answering research question 2.

Results
Demographic Information

The average age of the sample was 19.41 (SD=1.39). The sample was comprised of 183 (44%) male and 233 (56%) female. One hundred ninety-seven students (47.4%) had their social media accounts for one year, with 87 (20.9%) had the accounts for two years and 67 (16.1%) had accounts for three years. Of the respondents, 100 (24%) frequent users logged in multiple times a day, with 75 (18%) logging in everyday, and 65 (15.6%) logging in every two or three days, 64 (15.4%) logging in once a week, once a week. There were 112 (26.9%) who were inactive users and logged in once a month or seldom use Renren.

The first research question of the study is: “What is the impact of independent and interdependent self-construal on motivating Chinese young adults to use Renren?” In order to answer this question, two statistical tests were conducted. First, a Pearson correlation analysis was run among the four motivation variables along with independent and interdependent self-construal (see Table 1 for details). Results showed that interdependent self-construal was significantly positively correlated with each of the four motivation variables, while independent self-construal variable was significantly positively correlated with all but information seeking.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviation, Correlation, and Reliabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interdependent Self-construal</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Independent Self-construal</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Socialization</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Entertainment</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-status seeking</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Information Seeking</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>(.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N= 416. Reliability estimates, in parentheses, are alpha coefficients.

*P< .05  
**P< .01
In order to examine predicating power of two self-construal concepts for the four motives of using Renren, multiple stepwise regression analysis was conducted. In each of the four tests (Tables 2-5), the dependent variable was socialization, entertainment, self-status seeking and information seeking respectively and predicating variables included independent and interdependent self-construal, gender, age, logging on Renren and years in using Renren.

**Table 2** Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting for Socialization (Stepwise Regression Analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdependent Self-construal</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>.385**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-2.53</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable=socialization; N= 416 ; adjusted multiple $R^2$=.14

**Table 3** Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting for Entertainment (Stepwise Regression Analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdependent Self-construal</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Self-construal</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of log on Renren</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable=Entertainment; N= 416 ; adjusted multiple $R^2$=.16

**Table 4** Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting for Self-Status Seeking (Stepwise Regression Analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdependent Self-construal</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-2.10</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of log on Renren</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-2.74</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable=self-status seeking; N= 416 ; adjusted multiple $R^2$=.11

Parallel to correlation analysis, interdependent self-construal had a consistent predicting power for each of the motivation variables including socialization, entertainment, self-status seeking and information seeking. Only in the entertainment motive, independent self-construal had a significant predicting power. Other interesting findings included that age was a variable which negatively predicted self-status seeking, information seeking, and socialization; frequency of logging on Renren could predict entertainment and self-status seeking, and years in using Renren negatively predicted information seeking.

**Table 5** Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting for Information Seeking (Stepwise Regression Analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The regression analysis showed that Chinese young adults were still driven by their interdependent self-construal to use Renren to socialize, be entertained, seek information and self-status. This result suggested that collective cultural values motivate individuals to use the social media site. Independent self-construal predicted for entertainment only, which suggested that being entertained tends to be individual needs oriented. The independent self-construal failed to predict socialization, self-status seeking and information seeking.

**Table 6** Chi-Square Analysis of Frequency of Log on Renren among Males and Females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Log on Renren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a day</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once two to three days</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month or seldom</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second research question is: How do Chinese male and female young adults differ in using Renren? The first aspect of this research questions refers to how gender may affect frequency of logging on the social media. Chi-square results on Table 6 showed that males and females were significantly different on the frequency of logging on Renren (\( \chi^2 = 9.85, df = 4, n = 416, p<0.05 \)). Females tend to log on Renren more often than males. For example, 26% females logged on Renren several times a day, while 21% males did so.

**Table 7** Comparison of Males and Females on Motives of Using Renren (\( N = 183 \) males and 234 females)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Seeking</td>
<td>-2.32</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>0.021*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second aspect of gender impact in using Renren is how Chinese male and female have different purposes of using Renren. A t-test was conducted to exam research question two. Table 7 showed that males were statistically significantly different from females on information seeking (t= -2.32, p<.05) and self-status seeking (t= 2.01, p < .05).

An inspection of the means of the two group indicated that the mean of information seeking for female (M = 3.36) is significantly higher than the score (M = 3.15) for males, however the average score of self-status seeking for females (M = 2.95) is significantly lower than the mean score (M = 3.09) for males. Males did not differ significantly from females in entertainment and socialization.

**Discussion**

This is an exploratory study, focusing on how the cultural and gender factors affect Chinese young adults using Renren. It is evident that the Chinese economy has changed dramatically over the past 33 years, from a government controlled economy to a market oriented economy, from closed society to more open society, from a third world country economy to the 2nd largest economic power in the world. All these economic changes are hardly seen in individual cultural value changes as the study showed. This study suggested that the interdependent self-construal is still dominating young adults’ minds in terms of motivating them to use social networking site Renren. More important, the high economic development shapes young people’s capitalist beliefs, values, and attitudes. People are expected to become more independent and individualistic. It was anticipated that this independent self-construal may have some more predicting power among the Chinese young people’s minds. However, the results showed that the Chinese young adults are still influenced by the interdependent self-construal, which is the primary driving force for individuals to use the social networking site.

Secondly, the correlation results also suggested that independent self-construal does significantly correlate with all three motivations, except for information seeking. This finding indicates that although the interdependent self-construal remains the dominating driving force, independent self-construal also has a significant relationship with three motivation factors of using the social media site.

Thirdly, the variable of age tends to significantly negatively predicts socialization, self-status and information seeking. The older individuals become, the less they want to use Renren to socialize, seek self-status and information.
Finally, the results show that gender did play an important role in Chinese college students’ using social networking sites. Most studies conducted in the United States show that females are more active in social media use than males. Chinese female college students also tend to use Renren more often than males. As for the motivations of using Renren, male users and female users are significantly different in information-seeking and self-status seeking. However, they are not significantly different in entertainment and socialization. Both genders use social networking sites to satisfy their socializing and entertaining needs. At the same time, women use Renren to find interesting and useful information. Men appear to focus more on self-status when using social networking sites than women. It is reasonable to assume that females are more protective to their personal information, and they tend to disclose less information about themselves. They simply look for information on social networking sites.

These results contribute to the cumulative body of knowledge and also verify the existing knowledge from previous literature. However, this study also has several limitations. Most participants are from southern and northern parts of China, especially large cities, limiting the representation of other places like small towns or other rural areas in China. Moreover, the scope in designing the questionnaire is also limited. Finally, this study used a convenient sampling which poses constraints in representativeness of the target population.

Future research could be developed in several directions. First, how other demographic information such as differences in heavy users vs light users in consuming SNS. Second, a longitudinal study could be conducted to see a gradual change of users when using the same SNS. Third, people may use different SNS for different purposes. For example, Twitter users focus on information seeking and Facebook users focus on contacting friends. Fourth, an in-depth interview approach could be effective to better understand why people use social media.
References


