

# ***Picture Perfect or Picture True: A Comparative Study on Social Media Profile Picture Presentation and Motivations for Use among Chinese and American from Cultural Perspective***

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**Abstract:** This research explores the impact of cultural contexts on the choice and significance of social media avatars, focusing particularly on the contrasting behaviors of users in China and the United States, which represent the two largest global social media markets. Avatars, as visual representations of users online, offer a unique lens to examine implicit behaviors and self-perceptions, as they make manifest aspects of individuals' identities that may remain concealed in traditional forms of communication. The disparities in avatar selection between these two cultures are striking: while US users predominantly opt for authentic photographs, Chinese users display a preference for idealized or virtual images, such as anime, animals, or landscapes, often employing filters and beautification tools when their own images are used. The aim of this study is to scrutinize these differences in avatar styles, analyzing how varying cultural definitions of the 'self' and differing value systems influence personal definition and expression. In-depth interviews with social media users from both countries were conducted to corroborate these theories and provide firsthand accounts of user experiences. The central conclusion of this research posits that the divergences in avatar choices between Chinese and American users are primarily driven by distinct cultural conceptualizations of the 'self' and the varying influence of societal values on self-definition in the two countries. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of technology, culture, and identity, highlighting the role of social media as a platform for self-expression and cross-cultural understanding.

**Keywords:** social media, cultural differences, avatar, self-view

## **1. Introduction**

The advent of the internet during the Third Industrial Revolution has enabled information sharing on an unprecedented global scale, interconnecting people worldwide. The rapid rise of social media has transformed traditional interpersonal communication by creating new channels for interaction. Platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and China's Weibo, WeChat, and RED have become integral to daily life and work for people across the globe.

The evolution of information and communication technologies is reshaping people's everyday lives. Social media platforms aim to enhance user experiences through diverse functionality. Twitter,

for example, became one of the most popular social networks through its innovative “Tweet” feature for real-time sharing of photos, text, and locations, enabling users to continually update their status and sustain connectivity. This feature enhanced the distinctiveness of previously anonymous online users. Similarly, China’s Weibo emulated the Twitter model to provide Chinese users with a means of interacting with global internet users despite firewall barriers. However, users from different cultural backgrounds demonstrate behavioral variations in utilizing analogous features.

Both Weibo and Twitter strive to transform internet browsers from a homogenous mass into distinct individuals, encouraging personalization. Among various affordances, avatar selection further accentuates the uniqueness of each user, intensifying their “self” experience. Notably, substantial discrepancies exist between Chinese and American users’ avatar choices. On Twitter, Americans predominantly use unedited real photos as avatars. In contrast, Chinese Weibo users tend to customize their avatars by beautified photos, anime, scenery, celebrities, or pets [1]. This dichotomy persists cross-platform, with Westerners on Weibo still favoring genuine photos, unlike the Chinese majority.

What’s the real reason for the different avatar choices between Chinese and American users? This paper will examine the underlying cultural contrasts between China and America that contribute to divergent avatar predilections of users, and provide a novel idea for subsequent research on social media avatars, suggesting its potential significance in social and personal life.

## 2. Literature Review

Social media avatars have become an important tool for individuals to construct and present self-images in the virtual world [2]. They reflect the roles people wish to play in a collective setting and serve as external manifestations of self-identity and self-definition. Avatars have thus drawn much scholarly attention in communication studies, sociology, and psychology.

A study conducted by Noelle J. Hum et al. involved a comparison of young male and female Facebook users’ avatars to functionally analyze identity construction and gender roles on social networking platforms. This research indicates that gender does emerge as a variable impacting avatar selection divergence, yet no distinct gendered tendencies manifest [3]. The authors posit this owes to avatars constituting cultural imagery representing a more holistic conception of the “self”, of which biological sex is but one facet [3]. Hence, by approaching avatars as cultural symbols and examining the “self” through the lens of dominant cultural philosophies, the present study was able to delineate a more comprehensive narrative of the “self” underpinning observed differences. Framing avatars as cultural embodiments of multifaceted self-concepts, rather than focusing narrowly on gender, enables elucidating the sociocultural roots of self-representation choices on social media.

Another study by Elizabeth Mazur and Yidi Li analyzed American and Chinese social media posts to examine public self-presentation. They found Americans were more likely to share upbeat, self-focused content than Chinese users [4]. This study attributed the results to China’s collectivist traditions and ongoing societal shifts [4]. While the article contrasts Chinese and American social media use through a cultural and social values framework, its analysis overlooks key contextual realities of the Chinese internet landscape. Empirical observations indicate Chinese online platforms also prominently feature upbeat, optimistic subject matter aligned with mainstream societal priorities and interests. For example, Sina Weibo’s 2022 annual trending topics list underscores the lengthy engagement around celebratory, achievement-focused narratives like the Beijing Winter Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and advancements in aerospace technology [5]. Such persistently viral discussions centered on athletic victories, technological progress and national prestige suggest a prevalence of positivity-centric discourse among Chinese netizens. Rather than solely characterize the Chinese internet through a deficit lens focused on censorship and control, as the article implies, these observational data point to how users actively and voluntarily concentrate discussion on hope-

inspiring topics that boost social cohesion and morale. As Chinese values evolve in an increasingly prosperous, technologically innovative society, scholars must update analytical frameworks to more accurately capture this aspirational, community-building dimension of Chinese online expression and exchange. The attitudes that people maintain on the Internet affect their avatar use, so it is necessary to conduct interviews and cultural perspectives on the usage expectations of contemporary Chinese netizens.

The second research category examines avatars from a collective perspective, mainly Chinese scholars investigating factors shaping avatar choices as a collective-influenced outcome. For example, Lin Shengdong et al.'s study interviewed Chinese users on avoiding real photos, showing concerns over others' opinions significantly affected avatar selection [6]. However, they speculated on reasons for Westerners' common use of real photos without collecting self-reported data. In other words, the article is merely theoretical speculation about the motivations of Western users and does not test the hypothesis through actual interviews. In this case, this research will address this gap through in-depth interviews with Western users on the prevalence, authenticity, and motives behind using real-life photos.

Moreover, in their exploration of Eastern and Western self-concepts, Liu Shuang and Ma Jingran invoked philosophical traditions to elucidate the observed disparities in avatar usage on social media platforms. A comprehensive examination of Western notions was conducted, interpreting the concept of an autonomous self through the frameworks of philosophical thought and psychoanalytic theories [7]. Simultaneously, the Chinese conceptualization of self was evaluated in light of Confucian and Daoist perspectives [8]. Due to the fact that avatars serve as a mechanism for self-representation and definition, these divergent cultural thought processes may shed light on the differing directions observed. However, their study does not leverage these cultural differences to their full practical extent. In the absence of an objective representation, such theoretical postulations may indeed present more challenges in comprehension. The avatars studied in this research provide a practical manifestation of these cultural differences, offering a tangible lens through which these theoretical perspectives can be examined. This recontextualizes the philosophical and theoretical discussion into a more concrete and observable realm, thereby enhancing the accessibility and applicability of the study's findings.

In summary, scholarly definitions of the "self" diverge significantly on individualist versus collectivist lines. Avatar choices deliberately reflect cultural traditions and self-construction, allowing self-expression and presentation. Avatars visualize subjective self-concepts, enabling interpretation and understanding of differing Eastern and Western self-views.

This study integrates the divergent definitions of the self in predominant Chinese Confucian and Daoist schools as well as Western philosophy with the phenomenon of contrasting avatar selections to elucidate potential correlations. Moreover, an analysis is conducted on how the values of China and the United States, shaped by disparate philosophical mainstreams respectively, lead to "collectivist" versus "individualistic" orientations affecting avatar choices. In-depth interviews were subsequently carried out with Chinese and American social media users to garner insights into their motivations for avatar use. Responses serve to validate hypothesized relationships stemming from cultural and social value perspectives.

Overall, this research furnishes a cultural examination of the differing self-concepts in Chinese and American societies. It opens new avenues to conceptualize future scholarship at the intersection of social media and cultural divergences. The study provides a foundational cultural framework to comprehend variances in virtual self-representation through avatars on social platforms.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilizes three main research methods. First, due to its analytical perspective from a cultural perspective, Corpus was used to collect the views on “self” from both Chinese and Western classical philosophical texts. In addition, the different cultural perspectives summarized in the rest of the articles will also be used in the analysis. Secondly, this study uses the method of Archive, which accesses statistics published by common social media programs in China and the United States. Another research method is in-depth interviews. In this study, 10 interviewees were selected from China and the United States, totaling 20 interviewees. Interviews were conducted on the phone and on the Internet. Through the interviews, the real experiences and thoughts of users in both countries were captured.

#### 3.1. In-depth Interview

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. A total of 10 participants from the United States (US) and 10 participants from China were selected for this study. The sample size was determined based on the aim of capturing diverse perspectives on the “view of self” from a cultural standpoint. No additional participants were recruited, as the focus was on exploring and contrasting cultural perspectives rather than achieving statistical representativeness.

To ensure the suitability of interviewees for the study, certain criteria were established. Specifically, users with personal accounts were included, while accounts associated with official entities such as companies or bloggers were excluded. This approach aimed to preserve the value of analyzing cultural perspectives by focusing on individual users’ experiences.

The process of selecting interview samples in China involved labeling the 34 administrative regions alphabetically and subsequently utilizing a random number generator to obtain five numbers between 1 and 34. These numbers corresponded to different provinces, namely Guangdong Province, Beijing City, Jilin Province, Gansu Province, and Sichuan Province. Within each province, the “Chahua (Super Topic)” community on Sina Weibo was identified, and users were selected for interviews in chronological order based on the timing of their posts. Two respondents were chosen from each province, resulting in a total of 10 Chinese participants.

Similarly, in the United States, a comparable sampling method was employed. The operator function of Twitter was utilized to search for 10 users from Virginia, New Mexico, Florida, Rhode Island, and Nevada. Again, two respondents were selected from each state, yielding a total of 10 American participants.

The interview questions were carefully designed to encompass a comprehensive range of topics, including avatar motivation and self-assessment from a cultural perspective. Different sets of questions were tailored for Chinese and American users to account for cultural variations. The language used in the questions was formulated to be straightforward and easily understandable, facilitating respondents’ ability to express their perspectives truthfully. In total, 10 interview questions were posed to each participant, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives.

#### 3.2. Corpus

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of “self” within the contexts of classical Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, drawing upon idioms derived from traditional Chinese thought. Furthermore, it incorporates references to the understanding of the “self” within mainstream Western philosophical doctrines.

To achieve this objective, the study relies on a theoretical framework that encompasses previous scholarly articles and publications. By integrating and summarizing the theoretical foundations established in prior research, this study endeavors to present a more comprehensive cultural perspective on the notion of the “self.”

By synthesizing the insights from classical Chinese philosophies, Western philosophical doctrines, and existing academic literature, this study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the concept of the “self” from a cross-cultural perspective.

### **3.3. Archive**

Through the archival research approach, the study accessed publicly available data and content on social media platforms, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of Internet usage in both China and the United States. By comparing and contrasting the online landscapes of these two countries, the study aimed to draw conclusions about their similarities in terms of factors such as the size of the online population and prevalent topics of discussion. This serves to refute some of the misconceptions in the literature.

## **4. Explicating Variances in Avatar Choices Between Chinese and American Social Media Users**

Social media avatars, as representations of online identity, play an important role and are subject to observation and scrutiny by both self and others. In some ways, they can be seen as an extension and reflection of real-life self-concepts. Moreover, self-views are a core facet of culture, situated in the deepest structures and permeating all aspects of a group’s life, comprising individuals’ perceptions and definitions of their existence and worth [9]. Thus, understanding differences in self-views between Eastern and Western cultures can predict and elucidate variances in communication behaviors. Exploring differing interpretations of the “self” concept against diverse cultural backdrops will facilitate a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of social media avatar applications and meanings.

Through examining lifestyle variations between the U.S. and China historically, culturally, and in terms of social conventions, this study finds definitions and understandings of the “self” notably diverge between the two cultures. Unlike application distinctions, this stems from fundamental disagreements rooted in sociocultural conceptualizations of the self, in turn shaping online social interaction modes.

This paper will further analyze differences in Chinese and Western cultural definitions of the self, including influences from traditional philosophical thought. It will describe and trace the origins and formulations of these two self-views, highlighting the unique characteristics of each. By comparing and analyzing the formation of these differing cultural self-concepts, this research aims to gain deeper insight into the contrasting avatar application patterns on social platforms.

### **4.1. Chinese Users’ Self-View**

Chinese individuals are often stereotyped as conservative and quiet due to their reserved, polite nature. These traits cannot be separated from China’s social values. Collectively, the Chinese emphasize contributing to and finding value within the group. In family relations, they prioritize protecting the clan’s reputation and collective sentiments - hence the saying “Family scandals should not be aired publicly (家丑不可外扬).”

Traditional Chinese philosophies implicitly shape modern Chinese mindsets as well. When making mistakes, the introverted Chinese tend to blame themselves, believing it reflects insufficient personal cultivation.

Within this unique cultural milieu, contemporary Chinese self-views exhibit markedly different styles and explorations of the “self” compared to the Western world.

#### 4.1.1. Establishing Self by Collective Comparisons

In Chinese socio-cultural contexts, the collective consciousness significantly influences self-positioning. As part of a group, individuals determine their place by comparing themselves to others. Chinese self-theories focus on studying how to find the ideal relationship between the individual and society in real environments. By integrating into and contributing to society, individuals can establish their potential identities and selves through external feedback [6]. From this perspective, the self-view in traditional Chinese philosophy is more an expression of values, behaviors, and social relationships.

The Confucian self-concept pursues “inner sage” and “outer king,” emphasizing inner cultivation and outer social contribution. This self-view integrates personal aspirations with collective norms. Such a “self” benefits society by pursuing a harmonious, stable social order from the collective standpoint [8]. As the Confucian classic “Book of Rites (Liji)” stresses, inner “self-cultivation” and outer “family regulation”, “country governance”, and “the tranquil and happy of the country” are not in conflict [10]. Rather, they complement each other as crucial steps to realizing the ideal self.

Therefore, the Confucian self encompasses not just personal identity but also relationships with others and society. The overall Confucian self-view is constructed through these connections via mutual assistance and need fulfillment. In this process, people establish self-identity by observing their position and contributions to society along with feedback from others.

In Chinese idioms, many phrases with being “alone” have negative connotations. For instance, “一意孤行” denotes disregarding others’ advice and acting blindly, while “孤陋寡闻” indicates ignorance from lacking outside information. “孤苦伶仃” paints a picture of poverty and difficulty without assistance. These reflect Chinese cultural values emphasizing collectivism.

In modern China, unity and collectivism have become integral to social values. During the Anti-Japanese War, they manifested as resisting oppression and seeking national independence. China ceased internal conflicts to unite against external threats, gaining strength through military-civilian unity and laying the foundation for victory. After the PRC’s establishment, the national anthem also stressed the importance of “united hearts.” Economically, collectivism’s influence was evident in land reforms and the establishment of people’s communes. Despite developing market economies after Reform and Opening Up, collectivist thought remains deeply rooted, as seen in the goal of common prosperity.

Under such ideological conditions, Chinese users place more weight on social expectations of the self when choosing avatars. During interviews, four out of ten Chinese Sina Weibo users mentioned a desire for approval from others regarding their avatar selections.

For instance, when asked about her reasons for using beautified photos, respondent “Hazel” said she “hopes to gain others’ recognition through good-looking pictures of herself.” She added, “Sometimes my face gets pimples or gets dark circles that I don’t want others to see.”

Similarly, respondent “Yang,” who uses a rear shot of himself exercising as his avatar, noted: *I feel I’m not good-looking, so I don’t use a selfie as my avatar. Using my back while working out also highlights some of my strengths and avoids showing my weak points.*

When asked about avatars and social integration, Shenzhen resident “Riki” said her avatar is a virtual broadcaster she admires and that she wants to *find her organization online and integrate into the fan community.* She desires attention from like-minded peers and widespread acceptance.

This study also found that, constrained by collectivism, some Chinese adopt less conservative styles and openly use real photos on foreign social media. Chinese student “Aron” in the U.S.

mentioned wanting to *do as the Romans do* and assimilate into the local community. *The foreigners around me all use their own photos as avatars. I feel using mine makes me appear more similar to them. Even ugly foreigners use their own pictures, so I feel I can as well.*

In summary, Chinese users place greater emphasis on others' perceptions when selecting avatars. They embellish flaws and highlight positive traits, demonstrating how Chinese self-views are affected by collective opinions. Chinese avatar choices also shift based on surrounding cultural circles and environments.

#### 4.1.2. Formation of the Chinese "Ideal Self"

Unlike Western cultural definitions of the self that emphasize individualism and uniqueness, the Chinese self-view stresses personal betterment and cultivation as goals of human expression and practice, representing an idealized identity. Beyond Confucian self-cultivation, personal refinement and mindset shifts are especially critical in Chinese Daoist thought, which seeks transcendence through transforming inner states. The Daoist masterpiece "Dao De Jing" sets reaching states of "desirelessness," "unknowing," and "no action" as the ideal self's highest realm. "Unknowing" and "desirelessness" describe attained mental states, while "no action" refers to conforming to natural laws [11].

Under traditional conceptualizations of an "ideal self," modern Chinese people pursue identity idealization, hoping their self-image meets personal or others' expectations. The internet's anonymity and creative freedom with avatars facilitate constructing this ideal self.

In this study's in-depth interviews, eight out of ten Chinese Sina Weibo users chose virtual avatars, while the other two used edited or rear-view photos, demonstrating a desire to pursue idealized online personae in an unfamiliar environment.

Additionally, eight Chinese users described selecting current avatars because they looked "good," "cute," "handsome," "funny," or even "sexy." Further analysis showed three used anime avatars, two had pets, two used celebrity photos, and one employed humorous meme expressions. This signifies differing notions of an "ideal self," with avatars carefully chosen to match individual expectations.

Evidently, the essence of the "self" lacks emphasis in mainstream Chinese thought compared to idealization. Differing ideal self-concepts shape users' avatar content and themes [6]. Within public aesthetic constraints, users conceal blemished actual identities in pursuit of superior imagined selves.

## 4.2. American Users' Self-Views

Unlike the Chinese perspective emphasizing self-cultivation, the American and broader Western world has long endeavored to explore the fundamental meaning of the "self." Since Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am," the concept of self became an objective matter. Western scholars began examining this inherently "internal" self much like an "external" body of knowledge [7]. The West defines the "Self" as a protean concept - a set of sometimes contradictory, sometimes interdependent assumptions without an absolute flawless definition. The objectified concept of the Self is identity - the ideas and attributes attached to the Self.

America inherited Western academic traditions and perspectives of the self as independent from others, continually attempting to understand it by assigning definitions. This habit and ideology also took root among the American populace.

### 4.2.1. Self-Portraiture and Individualism

Influenced by the enduring Western values of independence and freedom, Americans tend to view the "self" as a distinct individual, emphasizing uniqueness and differentiation as an "existential experience" [7]. This diverges from the Chinese self-concept entangled with social relations.

Due to its relative separateness, Americans conceptualize “others” external to the “self” as discrete entities, regardless of whether they are family, friends, strangers, or foes [6]. Compared to the Chinese, they place greater importance on the singular and independent “self”, seeking to protect their most direct distinctiveness – their genuine appearance – to highlight their divergence from the outside world.

In this study’s interviews with ten American Twitter users, seven utilized their own unedited, frontal headshot photos as avatars. These images embodied the American belief in distinguishing themselves from others.

For example, high school student Michael’s avatar displayed a smiling headshot. When asked about considerations in selecting it, he wanted his avatar to be “unique”, “straightforward”, and “instantly recognizable” to reflect his desire to differentiate himself. When queried about not editing his photo, Michael remarked: *I don’t really see any point in using beauty filters or editing photos. I’m not one of those girly girls who’s super into makeup and stuff - I’d rather just be myself.* This demonstrated his wish to present an authentic self and delineate boundaries from particular groups.

Of the remaining three users, two adopted pet photos and one used a nature landscape as avatars. Some Americans provided rationales for eschewing self-portraits. Virginian waitress Daisy mentioned she previously used her own photo but frequently encountered appearance-based attacks, with insults like “Pig”, “Fatass”, and “Korean Bitch” despite not being Korean. This distress led her to change to a photo with her cat, as she felt it still reflected her genuine self. She avoided editing to prevent increased self-image distress. This indicates Americans without selfies still seek uniqueness and authenticity in avatars.

Additionally, 25-year-old teacher Scott retained his self-portrait for his Chinese social media accounts despite residing in China for six years. He did not conform to typical Chinese avatar preferences, stating: *I noticed my Chinese colleagues don’t do the same, but I don’t feel the need to follow their style. I mean sometimes I cannot even match their photos with them.* Thus, individualism disinclines Americans from altering avatars to assimilate, preferring direct self-representation. They also view Chinese avatars as confusing for identification, further illustrating American straightforwardness in self-conceptualization.

In summary, individualism profoundly shapes American avatar selection by supporting perceptions of the self as distinct and exceptional, predisposing preferences for genuine self-imagery over other objects or images.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals distinct differences in avatar selection and self-perception between Chinese and American users, reflecting the influence of cultural values. Chinese users prioritize idealized self-presentation in avatar selection, considering it a representation of their inner, aspirational identity influenced by collectivist values. They may modify their avatars to align with changing social environments. In contrast, American users view avatar choice as a means to express their authentic self, emphasizing uniqueness and personal identity. Even without using actual self-imagery, Americans prioritize avatars that are associated with their sense of self.

Regarding self-concept, traditional Chinese scholars perceive the self as an ongoing refinement process, valuing self-cultivation and self-improvement as integral aspects of personal growth and self-actualization. Western scholars, including Americans, detach the self from the individual, adopting a more objective conceptualization. This is exemplified by the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself,” which emphasizes defining selfhood externally. These divergent perspectives have shaped different self-perceptions among Chinese and American individuals.

In summary, this research provides a unique cultural and value-based perspective on the differences in avatar usage between Chinese and American users. It offers insights into the crafted



idealized selves of Chinese users and the authentic self-differentiation pursued by Americans, aligning with their respective cultural values. The study also employed in-depth interviews to explore users' authentic considerations. However, certain challenges and limitations were encountered during the research process.

Firstly, some interviewees provided perfunctory responses when questioned about their avatar choices, hindering a deeper understanding of their underlying motivations and considerations. Their explanations often revolved around subjective preferences or random selection, lacking substantive insights. Additionally, the selection of suitable samples posed challenges due to Weibo's user filtering mechanism, which prioritizes users based on follower count. As a result, a random selection approach was employed, targeting users from different regions within the "Caohua (Super topics)" community based on post timing. It is important to note that the "Chaohua" community within administrative regions exhibits lower user activity compared to the more popular "Chaohua" community, where the majority of users are concentrated. This discrepancy further complicated the sample selection process, potentially resulting in inadvertent errors in the selection of interviewees.

While in-depth interviews provided valuable insights into the underlying factors driving avatar selection, the study did not facilitate large-scale analysis to establish correlations between these factors and the selection process. Future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methodologies, such as survey questionnaires, to validate the prevalence of these trends across broader demographic groups. Additionally, the use of ethnographic research methods could offer a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between culture and avatar choice. These complementary approaches would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a comprehensive view of the cultural influences on avatar selection in social media.

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