

Generational Differences in WeChat Avatars: Transmutation of Identity Symbols in China's Generation X and Generation Z

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Abstract: With the internet development in China, social media is becoming more and more popular, and many older people are beginning to use social media. Thus, a generation gap regarding identities on social media begins to appear. In this article, the author focuses on the generation gap in WeChat profile pictures between Generation Z and Generation X. The author uses Netnography and in-depth interviews to examine and analyze the differences between the WeChat profile pictures and the reasons behind one's choice of social media profile pictures of the two generations. The author categorizes the sampled WeChat profile pictures based on the nine cultural spheres and analyzes the differences and their causes based on the cultural spheres. Dramaturgy, identity symbols, developmental psychology, and history are being used to analyze the reasons behind these differences. This study reveals how the introduction of foreign culture into China and identity symbols influence the choice of profile pictures for Gen Z and Gen X.

Keywords: WeChat Profile Picture, Identity Symbol, Generation Gap, Cultural Sphere

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the progress of Internet literacy, more and more older adults have Internet access and have begun to use communication tools such as WeChat. WeChat is one of the most essential communication tools and social media for Chinese people. WeChat users can upload a picture as their WeChat profile picture. Previous studies have shown that WeChat users use their profile pictures to show their identities, which means that profile pictures are an essential platform for studying online identity symbols [1, 2]. Compared with public platforms such as Weibo and TikTok, WeChat is more personal and emphasizes personal relationships and communications, connecting users with their acquaintances in real life. Thus, WeChat profile pictures reflect more users' real-life identity [3]. Unlike other WeChat functions such as friend circle, users can not block others from seeing their profile picture, which means that Profile pictures must be shown to everyone. Thus, the WeChat profile picture serves as the most public representation of a user's identity [4]. The function of WeChat profile pictures varies, including but not limited to self-motivation, amplifying strengths, showing personal interest and catharsis, etc. [5].

The author noticed a significant difference among the profile pictures of Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980). However, most previous

studies on this topic focused on analyzing the patterns and contents of the profile pictures, which were classified according to scenery, plants, selfies, etc. They lacked the analysis of the different cultural circles reflected in their heads. Therefore, this article will classify the cultures reflected in the WeChat profile pictures according to nine major cultural spheres: Western European cultural sphere, Eastern European cultural sphere, East Asian cultural sphere (excluding China), Chinese cultural sphere, South Asian cultural sphere, Southeast Asian cultural sphere, Islamic cultural sphere, African cultural sphere, Latin American cultural sphere, and Pacific cultural sphere. The author proposes a hypothesis for the profile picture of Gen Z and Gen X WeChat users: The cultural spheres reflected in the avatars of Gen Z and Gen X are significantly different. Moreover, the author analyzes the causes for this difference from the perspective of identity symbol, dramaturgy, developmental psychology and history. The author used both ethnography and interviews as the method to study the samples. In the ethnography, the author combines interview and network ethnography to collect samples from the WeChat groups and streets of Shanghai citizens. The author studied the WeChat groups in the square dance groups as samples for Generation X and three local schools in Shanghai as samples for Generation Z. These samples are compared and analyzed based on the cultural spheres that are reflected. In the interview, the author adopted the method of random street interview and acquaintance introduction. In July 2023, the authors randomly interviewed a sample of 9 Gen X and Gen Z in various districts of Shanghai. At the same time, the author interviewed 11 Generation X and Generation Z living in Shanghai through the introduction of acquaintances.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sampling

There are several reasons why the author chose Shanghai as the sample collection area. Firstly, Shanghai served as a concession for nearly a hundred years, from 1845 to 1943. During that time, other cultural spheres profoundly influenced it and showed a more open attitude towards other cultures. Moreover, Shanghai became a special economic zone in 1992, attracting many foreign enterprises to enter Shanghai, which also brought a more diverse culture to Shanghai. Thus, with the rapid development of Shanghai's economy, Generation X can work in foreign-funded enterprises, travel worldwide, and have a deeper understanding of foreign culture. One of our Gen X samples even studied abroad. In a word, Generation X in Shanghai has more exposure to and understanding of foreign cultures than Gen X in most other parts of China, both themselves and their parents. As for Generation Z in Shanghai, with the information explosion and the rise of the Internet, Generation Z in all parts of China has almost the same opportunities to be exposed to foreign cultures. Therefore, Generation X in Shanghai is more influenced by foreign culture than Generation X in other regions, while Generation Z in Shanghai is the same as Generation Z in other regions. Therefore, if foreign culture influences the identity symbols of these two generations in China, the difference between Generation X and Generation Z in Shanghai should be smaller than the national difference. In other words, if there is still a significant difference between the profile pictures of WeChat users of the two generations in Shanghai, there is a high probability that the research conclusions of this sample can be generalized to the whole country. Secondly, the author is located in Shanghai during the study, so it is more convenient to collect data in Shanghai.

2.2. Netnography

Netnography, proposed by Robert V. Kozinets in *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*, is defined as ethnography based on computers as a source of information [6]. Netnography is a relatively new but popular method for studying online communities in social sciences. The author randomly selected 301 students from three local schools in Shanghai as samples of Generation Z and

184 older adults from square dance groups of residents in Shanghai as samples of Generation X. The author classifies profile pictures in cultural circles according to their symbols. For example, the appearance of the Japanese anime One Piece character will be classified as the East Asian (excluding Chinese) cultural circle. For culturally indistinguishable profile pictures, the authors classify them as unidentifiable.

2.3. Interviews

The author conducted random interviews with passers-by in different areas of Shanghai and obtained nine samples of Generation X and Generation Z. For those interviewees. The author adopted semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which lasted 10-20 minutes. The author also interviewed 11 Generation X and Generation Z members living in Shanghai by telephone through the introduction of acquaintances, using semi-structured interviews, each lasting about 10-20 minutes.

3. An analysis of Generational Differences Between Gen X and Gen Z

In Generation X, there are only three cultural circles: Chinese, Western European, and East Asian (Chinese excluded). In Generation X, Chinese culture is almost the dominant culture, and Western European culture is the dominant foreign culture. In contrast, in Generation Z, Western European culture, East Asian culture, and Chinese culture occupy almost equal proportions. Moreover, In Age Z, there are five cultural circles: China, Western Europe, East Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The author will use identity symbols, dramaturgy, developmental psychology, and history to analyze the differences between the Wechat profile picture of Gen X and Gen Z.

Marx pointed out in *Theses on Feuerbach* that the essence of man is the sum of all social relations. [7] We acquire our identity through social interactions and use symbols to represent our identity. Identity symbols help us establish and form a sense of self and constrain our behavior [8]. Goffman believes that in the interaction between people, everyone plays a role, like characters in drama plays. People's performances are divided into "front stage" and "backstage," where people play a role, while backstage is a more relaxed and undisguised state with close people. Because of its openness, WeChat avatar has become the "front stage" for people to show their identity symbols. [9] In WeChat, while users hope to display their identity symbols through profile pictures, identity symbols also constrain them. Since Generation X has been in society for a long time and has more stable and prominent social symbols, they are more bound by social symbols. In interviews, multiple Gen X samples asserted that their job was the most significant influence on the choice of profile picture. Since one of the main functions of WeChat is work communication, they want their colleagues and customers to feel their professions and form a good impression when they see their profile pictures. For example, S14, who works for a foreign company, said he thought his selfie in a suit would reflect his professionalism, so he chose this photo as his profile picture. The suit in this profile picture indicates his identity symbol working in a foreign company. Interestingly, S17, S19, and S20 in the interview believe that if the profile picture of the Gen Z generation they know does not match their identity symbol, such as not showing their professionalism as an employee of the company, they will also advise their Gen Z colleagues to change their profile picture to match their identity symbol. This indirectly reflects the strong constraint of identity symbols on Generation X. As a result, the profile pictures of Generation X are primarily concentrated in the Chinese or Western European cultural circles, which are related to their established identity symbols in their workplace. In contrast, most Generation Z young people are still studying in school or just entering the workplace and have not formed a solid and prominent identity symbol. As a result, they are less bound by identity symbols than Gen X, so their avatars reflect more diversity.

4. Zeitgeist Factors in the Shaping of Generation X and Generation Z Identity Symbols

According to Erik Erikson's stage of psychological development theory, adolescents begin to develop their identity from 12-18 years old. Thus, the author will assume that age 12-18 is the most active time for a person to interact with the environment and absorb new information. Hence, according to Erik Erikson's stage of psychological development theory, the most influential period for Generation X will be 1977-1998, and the most influential time for Generation Z will be 2009-2030.

4.1. Generation X

Historical development is essential for understanding the differences since their environment influences each generation. During 1977-1998, generation X experienced reform and opening up, which led to economic reform materially and the adolescent cultural movement spiritually.

The reform and opening up is an event that China partly opens itself to the world economically and culturally. Its impact on material life is the economic reform, which foreign culture permeates China through daily life. With the economic reform, foreign businesses were allowed to enter China. Moreover, during that time, America had the world's most dominant economic power. Thus, people began to adopt foreign companies such as McDonald's, and the McDonaldization it later caused can also serve as compelling evidence. Moreover, with the aspiration to join the world's economy, China began to offer English courses, and this caused a strong cultural influence in China. For example, An interviewee said she first learned about a foreign culture through English learning.

Moreover, the rapid change in material life paved the way for the intense embrace of foreign culture in the '90s: the rise of Hollywood movies, Taiwan movies, and Hong Kong movies. With the yearning for entertainment after being released from communist society, the rebellion against class division and high culture, and the development of the market economy, mass culture began to appear in China during the 1990s. Many auditoriums appear on the street, and watching foreign movies becomes a fashion. These movies were influential to people at that time. Three interviewees mentioned that they first learned about a foreign culture through movies. Moreover, the development of mass culture increases the variety of cultures [10]. Thus, other than American cultural products, Hong Kong and Taiwan cultural products also begin to appear. This also partly explains why, under the intense impact of Western culture, many people still choose symbols from Chinese culture in their avatars.

In the spiritual life, an adolescent cultural movement was held during the 1980s. The adolescents passionately embraced Western philosophy and ideology. On the one hand, just like adolescents from all other adolescent movements, the adolescents in China during the 1980s also criticized the traditional and mainstream culture. On the other hand, since this movement was right after the cultural revolution, which created a blank in Chinese traditional culture due to the destruction of the four old movements, the adolescents also have deeply experienced the emptiness and confusion of losing their own culture. Hence, ideas in these movements separated to fill the emptiness in the culture created by the cultural revolution and the adolescent cultural movements. Some adolescents fully embrace Western culture to fill this blank. For example, many adolescents adapt to Western philosophers such as Nietzsche. They also embraced Western ideology, especially liberalism. Because Western European philosophy and social science were dominant then, they were the most critical things adolescents could learn from foreign scholars at school and, thus, the most influential. The other adolescents embraced Chinese traditional culture and strived to revive Chinese culture [11]. Consequently, Western and Chinese cultures are most influential to Generation X and thus reflect on their avatars.

4.2. Generation Z

The first reason for the variation in culture is that during 2009-2030, most of the countries around the world developed their culture industry. The globalization of cultures became critical after the collapse of communism and the development of new media [12]. After the communism collapse, the barrier of information between the capitalist world and the communist world was weakened, and the goal of the cultural industry in each country was not to advocate and protect their ideology but to make a profit and become influential in the world. Thus, the cultural industries' goals changed, which paved the way for their future development. Moreover, developing a country's cultural industry is strongly tied to the country's economy, and developing countries' economies have been boosted in recent decades. From 1977 to 1998, the countries, other than countries from the Western European cultural sphere and the Soviet Union, with strong economic power were Japan and Brazil. However, from 2009 to now, we can see the rise of the economies of China, India, Russia, and South Korea. Thus, Chinese people can get in contact with more cultural products from various cultures and be influenced by them.

The second reason is that virtual communities are built with the development of the internet. With China's modernization, the society's structure begins to change. Before, the community was based on region and culture. However, due to the intense migration, urbanization, and explosion of cultural diversity led by cultural industry, the traditional community began to disappear, and the disembodied community, primarily the community of interest, appeared. In these virtual communities, people use online rituals and symbolic exchanges to build identities, and these identities further enhance their connection to a particular culture and lead people to slowly but firmly adopt foreign cultures. Thus, with a deeper understanding of foreign cultures, they become less concerned about incorporating foreign symbols into their public identity symbols: WeChat profile pictures. Thus, virtual communities enhance the influence of foreign cultural products and influence people's identity symbols [13].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper collects and analyzes the WeChat profile pictures of Generation X and Generation Z in Shanghai through network ethnography and in-depth interviews. The author finds that there is a difference in the variation of the cultural circle reflected in the WeChat profile pictures of Gen X. Gen Z. Gen Z reflects more cultural circle symbols than Gen X. The author analyzes the reasons for this difference from the perspective of identity symbol and dramaturgy as well as the historical development and believes that it is the restriction of identity symbol on generation X and the influence of foreign cultures in China that leads to the difference of profile pictures between the two generations.

There are still many defects in this study. The sample size of this study is too small, and only the data from Shanghai is collected. At the same time, due to convenience sampling--acquaintances introduced the interview samples--there may be coverage bias: most of the X-generation samples are concentrated in the middle class and above, and they are highly educated. The sample of Gen X from Netnography only comes from square dance groups. These people have more social connections with others and are often middle class as well. Thus, for Gen X samples, people with lower income and less social connections may not be covered. Moreover, during street interviews, some passers-by refused to answer. Thus, non-response bias is also a potential bias. At the same time, some interviewees show a defensive posture in the interview process so that response bias may occur. Last but not least, the symbol of cultural spheres is determined by researchers subjectively, which may also lead to bias.

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