

Culturally Specific Privacy Practices on Social Network Sites: Privacy Boundary Permeability Management in Photo Sharing by American and Chinese College-Age Users

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This article explores the cultural specificity of privacy practices on social network sites (SNSs) by comparing 10 college-age American Facebook users' and 10 college-age Chinese Renren users' in their photo sharing of significant events during winter vacation. Using communication privacy management theory, we show that Chinese participants more tightly controlled their privacy boundary permeability than American participants. Also, Chinese participants' relationships with Renren friends—potential information co-owners—featured more distance and formality than American participants' close interactions with Facebook friends. We interpret the findings in light of American and Chinese cultures to contemplate the cultural manifestation in SNS privacy practices.

Keywords: culture, Facebook, privacy, Renren, social network sites

When people act to achieve or maintain their desired privacy, they engage in privacy practices, or a dynamic interpersonal boundary-control process that regulates access to the self (Altman & Chemers, 1980). Privacy practices can be culturally specific (Altman, 1977). The Tuareg tribal custom of veil wearing, the Javanese practice of speaking softly, and the Japanese consensus on exercising restraint with whatever one overhears are some of the many ways that people manage privacy that are unique to their cultures and not readily understood by outsiders (Geertz, as cited in Westin, 1967; Mizutani, Dorsey, & Moor, 2004; Murphy, 1964). On social network sites (SNSs) around the world, people's privacy practices now take various forms: using privacy settings, selectively presenting information, and even deactivating accounts (boyd & Marwick, 2011). Is there a culturally specific aspect to these practices? Our study is concerned with this question.

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The questions of cross-cultural variations in SNS privacy practices and the role of culture therein have yet to be thoroughly addressed. SNS privacy practices have received much attention from scholars, but the focus has primarily been on Anglo-American contexts (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008). Although there have been several cross-cultural studies on SNS privacy, these survey-based comparisons of privacy attitudes, privacy settings, and tendencies of privacy management in hypothetical situations cannot reveal the vast array of actual privacy practices of users in different cultures (Ji et al., 2010; Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, & D'Souza, 2008; Wang, Norcie, & Cranor, 2011). Also, in these studies, the efforts to obtain cultural interpretations using Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism (IC) theory were much thwarted. The cross-cultural variations they found rarely fit into the dualistic account of high privacy needs in individualistic cultures and the opposite in collectivistic cultures.²

Therefore, to investigate the cultural specificity of SNS privacy practices, we need to address two issues: Empirically, the rich phenomena of privacy practices on SNSs in various cultures must be compared; theoretically, a flexible framework of interpretation to help demonstrate cultural linkages needs to be found.

It is our hope to make such an exploration. This study is an in-depth comparison of the privacy practices of 10 American undergraduate SNS users and 10 Chinese undergraduate SNS users. The study applies Petronio's (2002) communication privacy management (CPM) theory concerning privacy-boundary-permeability management and culture. The theory posits that people's rule-based management of privacy-boundary permeability is related to their relationships with information co-owners and that privacy rules are the behavioral manifestations of cultural criteria. Our study inspects the privacy-boundary-permeability management of the two user groups specific to photo sharing during winter vacation. We compared the two groups in terms of (a) their privacy-boundary permeability as reflected in the shared photos, (b) their rules and strategies of permeability management in SNS photo sharing, and (c) the social distance in their relationships with SNS friends. We interpreted the comparison results using the model of cultural manifestation that CPM theory suggests.

Literature Review

Studying SNS Privacy Practices and Culture

When SNS users enjoy online interaction, they are also confronted with the privacy challenges that technology creates. Because a huge part of social life is conducted online, individual control of personal information often loses out to database marketing or government surveillance (Gandy, 2007; Turow, Feldman, & Meltzer, 2005). In addition to political and economic tensions, online interaction itself also causes unease over privacy. Because of the persistence, replicability, and searchability of online acts,

² The IC theory is limited in how it helps explain these studies' main findings. For example, Wang et al. (2011) found that Chinese SNS users' desire to control information visibility was stronger than that of American users. In Marshall et al.'s (2008) study, Indian students reported a much greater likelihood to ask strangers to leave them alone on SNSs than American students.

users have little confidence that they are revealing information only to intended audiences; the risk of unwanted access by other users looms large amid the conveniences of social networking (Palen & Dourish, 2003).

Given these challenges, SNS users often have high levels of privacy concern (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Tufekci, 2008). Privacy settings, built-in functions in most SNSs, are used as a major tool for privacy management (Lewis et al., 2008), but these settings often appear ambiguous to users, failing to measure up to the practical tasks of handling their online privacy (Livingstone, 2008). Another important method of privacy management is selective revelation. A Pew Research Center survey of American teenage users showed that only 2% revealed cell phone numbers and 29% posted e-mail addresses on their profiles (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Many users also withhold information about family life and sexual orientation (Goldie, 2006). Additionally, some users develop their own unique and often exceptionally stringent privacy practices: As boyd and Marvick (2011) found, some teenagers deactivate SNS accounts every day or delete their posts shortly after posting.

Given the popularity of SNSs around the world, these privacy practices are global phenomena; however, we should not ignore that such practices can also be culturally specific. Despite globalization, people "make their living in the space of places" (Castells, 2010, p. xxxix), and cultural traditions are still transmitted through education and mass media to shape people's values, including those of younger generations (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The Internet and its social meanings are defined in the interplay of technology, world markets, and local cultures (Ribak & Turow, 2003). Research has shown the cultural embeddedness of many social dynamics on SNSs, including online hostility, social capital formation, and relationship maintenance (Fragoso, 2006; Ji et al., 2010; Kim & Yun, 2007). Because of the enduring influences of culture on SNSs, we may expect that SNS privacy practices also have culturally specific aspects. Kim and Yun (2007) found an interesting practice among Korean SNS users that is exactly relevant to this point: To avoid information access by unwanted friends, they choose to close their own homepages temporarily rather than de-friend anyone because of their value of *Jeong*, which stresses relational interdependence. Such findings are currently rare because of the lack of research on SNS privacy practices outside of Anglo-American contexts. It is necessary to further explore this area and reveal the cultural specificity of such practices.

Understanding the cultural specificity of SNS privacy practices is also relevant to the debate in information policy concerning globalized privacy standards. The formulation of international privacy policy frameworks, such as the European Union Data Protection Directive and the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation privacy initiative, indicate the possibility of moving toward global privacy standards. Yet some scholars contend that such policies disregard cultural values and policy traditions and argue that it is important to localize privacy standards for different regions (Park, 2008; Pincus & Johns, 1997).³

³ A recent discussion on the "right to be forgotten" concerns the individual's right to ask search engines to remove results that are no longer relevant. This right was supported under EU data protection laws but faced strong opposition in the United States for its potential threat to the freedom of speech (Toobin, 2014), which illustrates the importance for policy makers to consider the localized meaning of online privacy in specific national cultural contexts.

Examining SNS privacy practices and culture will offer further insights for this debate and help with the creation of international policy solutions for SNS platforms.

Communication Privacy Management

In CPM theory, Petronio's (2002) view that privacy practices should be contextualized in one's relationship with information co-owners can help us grasp the unique relational dynamics surrounding SNS privacy practices. The model of cultural manifestation that Petronio's theory suggests can facilitate the interpretation of the complex role of culture in privacy practices. We will elaborate on these two points as we introduce and apply the theory below.

In CPM theory, the personal privacy boundary is a metaphorical line of personal information ownership between self and others. The boundary permeability, "the extent to which one's personal information goes out," ranges from completely closed to open access (Petronio, 2002, p. 31). The management of permeability involves applying rules and strategies that are the patterned methods of permeability regulation. For example, people often engage in various forms of selective revelation, managing permeability by controlling the depth of disclosure. They also resort to selective control of access, adjusting the accessibility of information to larger or smaller audiences. Rule-based permeability management, the theory stresses, needs to be coordinated with information co-owners, who may comply with it, request more information than what has been revealed, or share it with a third party. Whatever the rule, strategy, or state of permeability, it is the result of continuous coordination within specific relational dynamics involving information co-owners. Therefore, one's privacy-boundary-permeability management needs to be contextualized within relationships with information co-owners.

The rules of privacy management are behavioral manifestations of cultural criteria. Here, Petronio's explanation of cultural criteria suggests different routes of cultural manifestation (Figure 1). First, culture contains "privacy values" by which "people open or protect their boundaries to different degrees" (p. 39). In other words, privacy values largely determine how people manage privacy. This idea underlies most interpretations of privacy practices under the IC theory—because individualism emphasizes the right to privacy and collectivism understands one's business as the business of the group, we expect people in individualistic cultures to manage privacy more stringently than those in collectivistic cultures. Second, culture also "represents one resource people use to develop rules" (p. 39): People show a relative degree of agency in deploying cultural resources to construct and justify privacy rules. For example, the Japanese use their collectivistic value of interdependence for privacy. To avoid unwanted access, they do not say, "That is none of your business," but rather, "Leave it to me; I will do it as best I can for you" (Nakane, 1970, p. 121). An additional third possibility, which is not given in Petronio's explanation, fits her theory nonetheless as an indirect manifestation of cultural criteria. As Murphy (1964) noted, privacy management is sometimes necessitated by social distance in relationships, which is in turn conditioned by cultural values, norms, or customs. Among the Tuareg people Murphy studied, the custom of endogamy creates a tight web of crosscutting relationships in which people must keep a generalized distance, thus necessitating the rule of veil wearing in interactions.

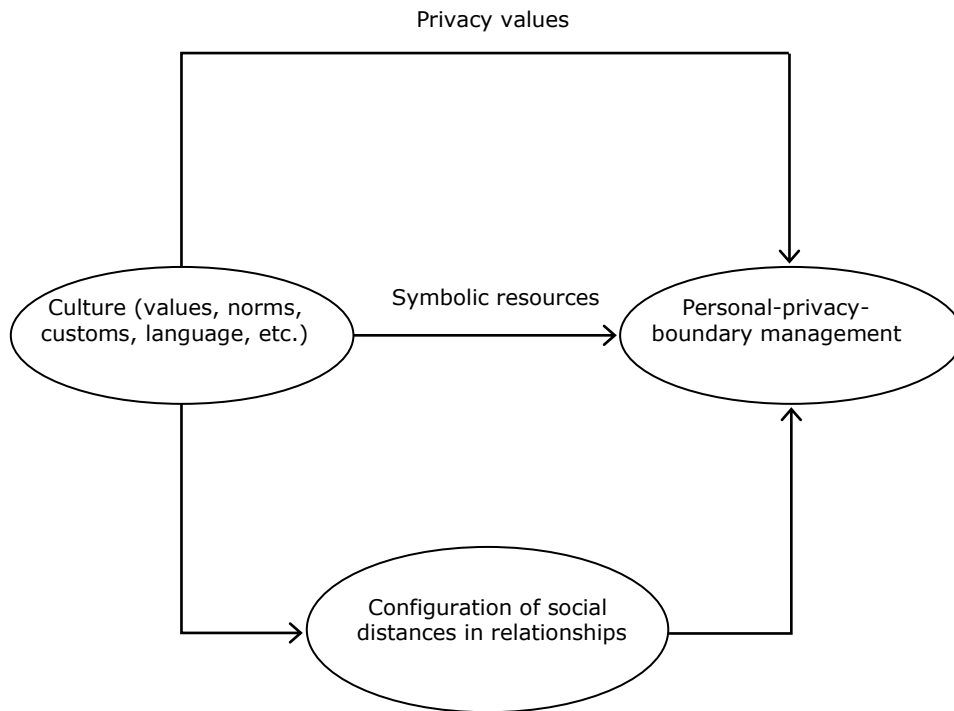


Figure 1. Cultural manifestation in personal-privacy-boundary management.

CPM theory is a comprehensive framework that links privacy management to relationships and culture. This framework can aid in the analysis of SNS privacy practices. Prior research has used the concept of privacy-boundary permeability to understand online privacy practices (Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Child & Petronio, 2011). Through this conceptual lens, SNS users' applications of privacy settings and selective revelation are properly considered permeability rules, which are helpful for permeability management by adjusting the range of audience and the depth of revelation, just as people in offline situations "cautiously expose flaws to certain others" or "hide health concerns" (Petronio, 2002, p. 32). These permeability rules are also important for photo sharing. Users often use privacy settings to restrict access to their photos, withhold photos that might be subject to negative interpretation, and present those depicting positive aspects of their lives (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Wisniewski, Lipford, & Wilson, 2012).

Yet unlike offline situations, in which one's privacy management is coordinated with information co-owners within definite relational contexts, these contexts are "collapsed" on SNSs (boyd, 2008, p. 34). Specifically, on SNSs, nuanced relationships from various social circles are reduced to a simplistic binary: friends or not (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The persistence and replicability of online data also make it difficult to restrict information access to specific audiences (Palen & Dourish, 2003). Given the collapsed

relational context, SNS users often orient privacy management toward SNS friends in general, considering all of them potential information co-owners (Marder, Joinson, & Shankar, 2012). For example, users often exclude content that might be subject to negative interpretation by any one of their SNS friends, revealing only what is appropriate to all of them (Hogan, 2010). Thus, in accordance with CPM theory, SNS users' privacy management arises out of their relationships with information co-owners, but because of the above-mentioned relational dynamics, their privacy practices need to be contextualized in their relationships with SNS friends in general.

Last, research has found that SNS users in collectivistic cultures often report more desire to control information visibility or ask to be left alone, compared with American users (Marshall et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011). The IC theory, with its underlying view that privacy values determine people's privacy practices, does not allow for a coherent interpretation of such findings. Leaning on the model of cultural manifestation that CPM theory suggests, if actual SNS privacy practices vary between collectivistic and individualistic cultures with a similar pattern, we can make interpretations along two additional lines: Is it possible that some cultural elements serve as symbolic resources that justify certain privacy practices? Or that these practices are an indirect manifestation of cultural criteria? These questions offer a broader view of the role of culture in SNS privacy practices.

Cultural Background

Based on the application of CPM theory, we consider SNS privacy practices behavioral manifestations of cultural criteria and expect that privacy practices among American users are somehow different from those of Chinese users. Both American and Chinese cultures are highly complex; instead of discussing them panoramically, we will highlight their key features relating to the dialectics of "openness-closedness" in social life that have potential bearing on individual privacy practices (Petronio, 2002, p. 12).

American culture is often considered individualistic because it stresses loose ties, interpersonal distance, and the right to privacy (Hofstede, 1980; Kim, 1995). Yet the individualistic life of America has also been enveloped in the important tradition of community, the cultural aspiration for creating communities where "a general ethical and spiritual life could be lived" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 29). Despite the disintegrating influences of urbanization and technology, American people retain their aspirations to meet people and get involved in communities. Their community life is found to carry on in new fluid forms online and offline (Wuthnow, 1998; Chayko, 2012). Therefore, the privacy practices of Americans may not simply embody their individualistic preference for being left alone but rather involve a negotiation between high privacy expectations and an aspiration for communal connections.

Chinese culture is often considered collectivistic, emphasizing interpersonal relatedness and the idea that one's business is the business of the group (Hofstede, 1980; Kim, 1995). Underneath this preference for openness, according to Liang (1987), is a concern not just for group members but for the whole society. The idea of *tian-xia* (all-under-heaven) essentially suggests that everyone is responsible for the creation of a society with good order (Zhao, 2006). However, Chinese culture also contains elements that justify some closedness in social life. As Liang stresses, the Chinese attach an overriding importance

to family, which overshadows the status of most other groups. Given the primacy of family, they withhold substantial information, especially private family matters, in nonfamilial relationships. As Confucius said, "The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this" (Legge, 1893, p. 270).

Given the dialectic of openness-closedness in both cultures, we cannot hastily hypothesize the differences in SNS privacy management between America and Chinese users. It is possible that American users control privacy boundaries more tightly while Chinese users are more prone to highly permeable boundaries, as suggested by the individualism-collectivism contrast. It is also possible that American users maintain a relatively open boundary for the sake of online community, while Chinese users are more prone to an impregnable boundary because SNS friends are mostly non-family members. Both groups of users may also use cultural values as resources to creatively construct privacy rules that meet their needs in various interactions. Because of the range of possibilities, the differences in privacy management between American and Chinese users may well be a topic for open-ended inquiry, requiring careful investigation of their privacy practices as grounded in their online relationships.

Our study compares the privacy practices of 10 college-age American Facebook users and 10 college-age Chinese Renren users, specifically addressing photo sharing. The method is elaborated in the next section, so suffice it to say here that we made the two groups comparable in terms of demographics, photographic proficiency, familiarity with SNSs, and offline contexts of SNS interactions to highlight the cross-cultural comparison. Each subject was asked to take 10 photos during winter vacation for sharing on Facebook or Renren. Guided by CPM theory, our comparison focuses on the two groups of subjects' rule-based privacy-boundary-permeability management as expressed through selective revelation and privacy settings. To contextualize the privacy management in online relationships, we also compared their social distances with SNS friends in general. Thus, we state our research questions.

- RQ1: What are the differences between American subjects and Chinese subjects in terms of privacy-boundary permeability as reflected in their shared photos?*
- RQ2: What are the differences between American subjects and Chinese subjects in the rules and strategies of privacy-boundary-permeability management in photo sharing?*
- RQ3: What are the differences between American subjects and Chinese subjects in the social distance with SNS friends in general, their potential information co-owners?*

We used the model of cultural manifestation in Figure 1 to interpret the results in the conclusion.

Method

We recruited 10 Facebook users from a public research university in the Midwestern United States and 10 Renren users from a national university in southern China. The recruitment was conducted through undergraduate listservs of journalism schools in these universities. We required participants to have used the SNS site for more than a year and be non-photojournalism majors. We picked the first five

males and five females who replied to the recruitment e-mail. In both institutions, undergraduates are mostly traditional students, who enroll in college immediately after high school. We recruited Renren users in China because Facebook is banned there, but Renren represents a similar option: It has evolved from a service for college students to a networking tool for the general population, and it borrows many of Facebook's features, including photo sharing and privacy settings.

The 20 recruited subjects were all traditional students aged 19–21. All American subjects were white, and the sample comprised both local and out-of-state students. Chinese subjects were predominantly Han people, except one member of the Chinese-speaking Muslim ethnic minority Hui, and the sample included students from southern, western, and northern China. We asked each subject to "take 10 photos of significant events during winter vacation for sharing on Facebook/Renren" and to send them back with captions concerning content and privacy settings. For both universities, the break lasted nearly a month around important holidays, Christmas and Spring Festival.

To answer RQ1, we conducted content analysis to describe privacy-boundary permeability as reflected in the shared photos, drawing on Child et al.'s (2009) measurement of blogging privacy-boundary permeability, which focuses on two aspects: the nature of personal information being revealed and to whom the information is revealed. As mentioned in the literature review, the boundary wall in SNSs is created mainly by selectively presenting private information and by restricting access to different audience ranges with privacy settings (Child & Petronio, 2011; Lewis et al., 2008). Therefore, in our analysis, we defined one's privacy-boundary permeability as the extent to which he or she reveals private information and makes the information accessible to a wider audience. With a focus on photo sharing, we consider private information in terms of activities in one's private life and of the private spaces where activities are performed.

Correspondingly, we coded each image by subject matter, public/private space, and range of audience. Our coding of subject matter served the dual purpose of describing photos and distinguishing private and public activities. After multiple rounds of viewing, we compiled an exhaustive list of subjects: family life, romantic relationships, hanging out with friends, travel, everyday landscape, religion, self-portrait, part-time work, school-organized activities, and social issues. Then we coded each image for its subject. Leaning on Tedeschi's (1986) discussion of public and private experiences, we treated part-time work, school-organized activities, and social issues as public activities, which one conducts to enact formal group membership or citizenship in the larger society, and we considered each of the other subjects private activities. Our coding of private and public spaces drew on Carr's (1992) public-space typology and Altman and Chemers' (1980) treatment of home space as exclusive private territory. We coded the homes of one's family, relatives, or friends as private space and the space outside homes such as streets, restaurants, parks, and squares as public space. Our coding of range of audience was based on the captions of privacy settings. Each photo was coded as being accessible to all SNS friends, some friends, or only the user.

Two researchers conducted the coding. The intercoder reliability test yielded Scott's pi of 0.72 for subject matter, 0.84 for private/public space, and 0.95 for range of audience, all adequate according to Neuendorf (2002). Coding differences were discussed to agreement. The analysis of coding results

employed a simple counting of the photos from American and Chinese participants in each category (subject matter, private/public space, and range of audience), and Fisher's exact test on SAS for the comparison of coding results between American and Chinese students.⁴

Following content analysis, we picked five students from each group for interviews. Most interviewees were those whose photos reflected their group's average level of privacy-boundary permeability, but some were those whose state of permeability was unique in their group (e.g., using especially stringent privacy settings). Interviews were semistructured, lasted 40–45 minutes, and were conducted in the participant's native language. We created questions in English and used back-translation between English and Chinese to ensure the equivalence of interviews. All interviews were transcribed and, if conducted in Chinese, translated into English. Interviewees were identified by pseudonyms.

To address RQ2, we focused the first part of the interview on privacy-boundary-permeability rules and strategies in photo sharing. Based on Child et al.'s (2009) study of blogging privacy-boundary-permeability management, we asked, "How do you feel about your photos on Facebook/Renren?"; "What kinds of photos do you feel uncomfortable sharing?"; and "How do you determine if a photo can be shared?" These questions were intermingled with discussions about the content and sharing decisions surrounding their shared photos.

We conducted a thematic analysis of their responses to determine the themes—that is, the rules and strategies of permeability control. Guided by Petronio's (2002) definition, we first identified all the units of text (i.e., sentences, or anecdotes as described in several sentences) that appeared to describe or suggest a way that a user controlled the extent to which his or her personal information was made accessible to others. Second, we sorted these units to formulate an initial set of themes, giving them provisional names. To justify establishment as a theme, at least two utterances were required across all interviews. Third, we reviewed all responses to refine the themes, combining some themes if applicable and removing those mentioned by some subjects but dis-confirmed by others in the same group. The themes were saturated until each theme was sufficiently supported by the responses of three or more interviewees in each group and the themes altogether offered a coherent account of permeability control for each group. The analysis resulted in six permeability rules or strategies, as presented in the results.

To answer RQ3, we used the second part of the interview to characterize the participants' social distance with SNS friends. Based on Kadushin's (1962) definition of social distance as the degree of actual interaction in social relationships, we asked participants to offer their own account of SNS interactions. Guided by Parks and Floyd's (1996) measurement of online friendship, we asked three questions corresponding to the dimensions of communication, commitment, and understanding: "What do you usually share with SNS friends on your page or their walls?"; "What do you usually do if a friend who updated his/her profile regularly has not done so for a long time?"; and "How do you usually deal with

⁴ Different from the chi-square test that requires random sampling and large samples, Fisher's exact test is useful for analyzing categorical data from small volunteer samples and thus is often used in small-scale exploratory studies (Agresti & Finlay, 2008).

SNS friends publicizing views different from yours?" Interviewers emphasized that these questions concerned SNS friends in general.

In the analysis of responses, for each dimension, we highlighted the type(s) of activities or reactions shared by three or more members of each group, which were used to characterize the degree of interaction for the group in this dimension. Next we compared the two groups by each dimension, to see if one group conducted more intimate communication, showed more commitment to SNS friendship, or had more understanding of differences than the other group. The comparisons were then combined for an overall characterization of one group's relationships with SNS friends as more close or distant than the other group's.

Results

Privacy Boundary Permeability in the Shared Photos

Table 1 outlines the comparison of privacy-boundary permeability as reflected by the shared photos. Compared to Chinese participants, American participants made their privacy boundaries more permeable, revealing more private activities and private spaces.

Concerning subject matter, all of American participants' photos depicted private activities. They shared 53 family photos, showing a rich spectrum of activities from making Christmas cookies to attending a concert with parents. By contrast, Chinese participants shared only 33 family photos, although these images similarly depicted various activities, including Spring Festival dinners and ancestral worship. They also shared 38 photos of public activities, including two photos related to part-time work, 20 related to school-organized exhibitions and meetings, and interestingly, 16 related to social issues. For instance, one image showed local officials' residences behind iron railings, where ordinary citizens are not allowed; another showed a packed waiting room in a bus station during Spring Festival. Altogether, 62 out of 100 photos from Chinese participants depicted private activities. This proportion was significantly lower than that of American participants ($p < .0001$, Fisher's exact test).

Concerning private/public space, 40 out of 100 photos from Chinese participants showed private spaces in the homes of immediate family, other relatives, or friends. This proportion was significantly lower than that of American participants, who shared 56 photos showing private spaces ($p = .017$, Fisher's exact test). Chinese participants also tended to stage private activities in public spaces. Among their 21 photos of gatherings with friends, 17 depicted public spaces like restaurants, parks, or an outside space near home (e.g., the community garden).

Concerning the range of audience, there was no significant distinction between the two groups ($p = 1.000$, Fisher's exact test). Almost all the photos from both groups were shared with all SNS friends. The only photo shared with several chosen friends was from an American participant, who shared with selected friends a photo of them TPing a tree together. He did not want to get anyone into trouble by sharing it with all friends.

Table 1. The Numbers of Photos Corresponding to Subject Matter, Private/Public Space, and the Range of Audience.

	Chinese participants		American participants	
<i>Subject matter</i>	Family life	33	Family life	53
	Hanging out with friends	21	Hanging out with friends	29
	Romantic relationships	1	Romantic relationships	6
	Religious life	1	Religious life	2
	Self-portrait	4	Travels	10
	Everyday landscape	2		
	Part-time work	2		
	School activities	20		
	Social issues	16		
<i>Private/public space</i>	Private space	40	Private space	56
	Public space	60	Public space	44
<i>Range of audience</i>	All SNS friends	100	All SNS friends	99
	Some SNS friends	0	Some SNS friends	1
	Only the user	0	Only the user	0

Privacy-Boundary-Permeability Rules and Strategies in SNS Photo Sharing

Explicit rules of privacy-boundary-permeability management. Here, we describe and compare permeability rules explicitly reported by interviewees. Both American and Chinese participants managed privacy through some rules of selective revelation, but those of Chinese participants reflected tighter permeability control.

Most American interviewees mentioned their reluctance to share family photos. Regarding what photos they would feel uncomfortable sharing, they said “family photos” or photos depicting “family problems.” Ellis never posted pictures that might reveal the exact location of her family’s house. For Abbey, the reluctance to share family photos was the consequence of “some intensified cyber-bullying”: “She [an SNS friend] took a photo from my album—it was myself with my family members—and put a very derogatory caption underneath it. A bunch of people commented on it. I was very hurt and disrespected.”

Most American interviewees also stated their inclination to disclose positive aspects of life or to avoid revealing negative aspects. They refused to “publicize people’s vulnerabilities” or made sure Facebook photos were “socially appropriate.” Derek used the standard of whether photos were “fit for a Christmas card” when sharing photos during winter vacation.

Considering the two rules together, we can see that despite the reluctance to share family photos, American subjects had little problem disclosing positive aspects of private life. This is reflected in their photos—they revealed many personal activities, but all these images presented personal life to be

warm and happy, even in the few depicting unhappy incidents. For example, Ben's photo about his grandma's sudden hospitalization depicted her face framed in a Skype window, recording a moment of an online family conversation. He explained why he shared it: "There was a comedy to it. Just the way they looked . . . like aliens looking at us, and us looking at some aliens in a jar."

Most Chinese interviewees reported their unwillingness to share photos about family and photos about romantic relationships. Asked what photos they would feel uncomfortable sharing, they mentioned those of "family members and hanging out with my girlfriend" or the desire to "keep a low profile on my family and boyfriend." Ji Ming said, "For things about family and my girlfriend, I like keeping them in the depth of my heart. Probably that is an aspect of me being a typical Chinese." However, the only photo concerning romantic relationships shared by Chinese participants was from him. The photo was a highly understated expression; a shot of a toy bear with the caption, "I am thinking about her," although he met his girlfriend several times during the break.

Most Chinese interviewees also stated an inclination to reveal public aspects of their lives or to withhold private aspects. For some, most Renren photos depicted school activities or public places. Ji Ming even expressed an aversion toward those who always post photos about private life: "They are concerned about themselves all the time. Shame on them!"

Based on these results, we can see that in contrast to American participants, who were reluctant to share family photos but willing to share positive aspects of private life, Chinese subjects were inclined to avoid revealing private life in general, particularly photos related to their families and romantic relationships.

Implicit strategies: Narratives of self and society. The implicit permeability strategies were not plainly identified by the subjects as privacy practices; our understanding of this emerged from their discussion concerning specific photos. In these photos, which were accessible to all SNS friends, they managed to "camouflage" some private content through narratives of self and society. In using these strategies, Chinese participants also exerted a tighter privacy control than their American counterparts. The strategy of hiding private content by self-oriented expression was used by both American and Chinese participants, but that of hiding family information by narratives of social issues was used only by Chinese participants.

Members of both groups described sharing certain photos for personal expression or memory, with the photos holding a significance that was not meant to be apparent to SNS audiences. Two photos from an American subject, Abbey, depicted a painting that was an anniversary gift for her parents and a cake for her sister. When asked why she shared them, she explained, "I did the painting myself for Dad. Painting is what I love . . . It [the cake] is a 'pink-lady apple.' I did all of that all day. It was really special between my sister and I . . . I would do anything for family." Some of this information was not clearly revealed in the photos. By simply looking at the images, people could not tell that she loves painting or would do anything for family. Only when further prompted to explain her sharing decisions did she add, "It was not really like for any friend on Facebook. It's more a reflection on who I am, what I value." Other participants, both American and Chinese, showed similar tendencies. For example, American participant

Carl said that photo sharing could serve “only to document memory for myself” and that his photos were not always meaningful to friends. Chinese participant Ji Ming explained why he shared a photo of going to mosque for a Muslim service: “I went to that mosque often when I was a child. Time passed quickly. An important purpose for sharing it was for my own memory.”

Another strategy—hiding private content through narratives of social issues—was found only among Chinese participants. In some family photos, private information was made less evident by participants’ wrapping it inside narratives about social issues. The caption of a photo from Ai Feng reads, “I went to buy New Year couplets with my auntie and older cousins.” Yet the photo showed an empty shot of the market, depicting none of his family members. When asked why he shared such a photo, he explained his real concern: “Many people do the ‘human-flesh search’ [netizens’ collaborative hunt for exposing individuals to public humiliation]. You never know if your family did things people want to know.” Yet he added, “Young people no longer go to the couplets market. I want to show everyone what it looks like.” Because there was such an important public narrative about the loss of a tradition, the absence of family members’ images was well justified. Other Chinese participants also used this strategy. For example, when asked why she shared a photo of her mother going to a public-square dance, Fan Si said, “The lifestyle has changed. People go outdoors . . . [and] communicate with others.” Stressing this narrative about the change in urban lifestyle, she placed the group dance in the visual center of the photo, leaving her mother’s image hardly perceptible in the background.

Social Distance with SNS Friends, the Private Information Co-Owners

For our participants, SNS friends were the co-owners of the private information revealed in photo sharing because most photos were accessible to all SNS friends. Here, we compare the two groups of subjects’ social distances with SNS friends in general, based on their accounts of SNS interactions.

On the dimension of communication, most interviewees from both groups reported the frequent sharing of articles, photos, music, and videos with SNS friends. Most American interviewees also used their Facebook walls to post messages for setting up offline informal gatherings. Chinese interviewees did not report this usage, despite the similar design of Renren. Their SNS communication featured a sense of functional formality. Most Chinese interviewees used Renren to share “useful” things, “tips for graduate school entrance exams,” or “study methods and exam materials.” Such usage was not reported by American interviewees.

On the dimension of commitment, if an SNS friend who updated his or her profile regularly had not done so for a long time, American and Chinese interviewees’ reactions showed a marked difference. Most American interviewees chose to contact the friend. Carl said he would “get ahold of them” if he could “contact them by phone in real life.” Ben would even blame himself: “I would probably think it was my fault. There hasn’t been any communication because I haven’t instigated any.” By contrast, most Chinese interviewees said they would not mind the situation.

On the dimension of understanding, the two groups showed a sharp contrast in their reactions to SNS friends publicizing views that differed from their own. Most American interviewees would avoid

argument. Ellis said, "I don't take it personally if people have different opinions than I do." Abbey said, "I would drop the conversation. Because of the friendship . . . it wouldn't be worth fighting over." Conversely, most Chinese interviewees stated that they would engage in discussions. Ji Ming recalled that when a Renren friend challenged his opinion, he "kept on persuading him . . . even in a slightly ironic tone" and that he "felt good" when his opinion prevailed.

Considering these dimensions together, we can see that for American participants, as Ben said explicitly, "Facebook is a community," or in Derek's words, it is a platform to "grow in a friendship with another human being." Their Facebook interactions were typically community-like, featuring closeness and warmth reflected by informal communication, commitment to friendship, and understanding of differences. For Chinese participants, there was distance and formality to their Renren interactions. Renren was considered their social network and group-study platform, which remained functional despite arguments or absence of some friends. In general, American participants' relationships with SNS friends were closer than those of Chinese participants.

This comparison allows us to better understand the subjects' privacy practices. For Americans, when SNS friends were also members of their Facebook communities, it was reasonable to share many private yet positive aspects of their lives. As Abbey said, "I do feel that *closeness* with my friends to *share* the experiences" (emphasis added). For Chinese participants, SNS friends were generally tied to them in relatively distant and formal relationships, and this made it understandable to withhold private information, especially about family and romantic relationships. As Ji Ming said, "If I post those photos [depicting family and girlfriend] . . . I would feel like I am *exposing* my happiness" (emphasis added).

Conclusion and Discussion

Our analysis shows that in sharing photos of significant events during their winter vacations, Chinese participants exerted tighter control over privacy-boundary permeability than American participants, as reflected in their shared photos and application of privacy rules and strategies. Corresponding to their stringent privacy control, Chinese participants' relationships with Renren friends were relatively distant in comparison to American participants' relationships with Facebook friends. The overall pattern—that Chinese participants managed privacy more stringently than American participants—does not fit the claim of IC theory. Yet with the model of cultural manifestation in privacy management that CPM theory suggests (Figure 1), it is still possible to interpret the results based on cultural differences.

First, because of the primacy of family over other groups in Chinese culture, it may be considered normal for Chinese participants to maintain distance with Renren friends, who are mostly non-family members. Given the aspiration for communal life in American culture, American participants' community-like interactions with Facebook friends are also understandable. For both groups, privacy practices seemed appropriate in their respective configurations of social distance with SNS friends. It was as natural for Chinese participants to protect information about family and romantic relationships in the relatively distant Renren relationships as it was for American participants to share many happy aspects of private lives in their Facebook "communities." In this sense, we interpret American and Chinese participants' social

distances with SNS friends as conditioned by the community tradition in American culture and the family values of Chinese culture; their different privacy practices, therefore, are indirect manifestations of cultural values.

Second, Chinese participants' strategy of hiding private information using narratives of social issues may suggest that the cultural idea of *tian-xia*, which indicates social responsibility for all under heaven, offers a resource for privacy management. Although our data cannot directly show the appropriation of this idea in privacy management, we can at least infer that it may serve as a symbolic resource for the justification of this privacy strategy. In Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs' (2006) words, given this cultural idea, an online "ideal-self" can be created by presenting oneself as public minded with one's personal life as an inconspicuous sideline to social issues.

These cultural connections may also have to do with the uniqueness of SNS technology. Designed for social networking, SNSs are platforms where users are likely to manage privacy to fulfill the state of relationships they aspire to, which highlights the link between SNS privacy practices and relative social distances between SNS friends. As a relatively new environment for social life, SNS platforms feature fewer established norms, which may facilitate the use of cultural resources to justify privacy management. In this sense, the culturally specific privacy practices of our study participants are shaped by the interplay between culture and technology.

Our interpretation does not suggest that non-cultural factors are not important. For both nations, Internet privacy law has significant problems, whether it is over-reliance on corporate self-regulation in America or the appalling lack of restriction on state intrusion in China (Williams, Lwin, & Tan, 2005), that necessitate users to control their privacy. In both societies, the online space also involves chilling effects on disclosure, such as cyber-bullying in America and human-flesh searches in China. The dimensions of law and online social milieu are surely significant. However, due to disclosure-inhibiting forces in both America and China, we cannot account for the obvious difference of stringency of privacy practices in our study.

This study is a small-scale exploration based on a comparison of SNS privacy practices by two groups of college-age users during winter vacation. The patterns we found resonate with some prior findings that SNS users in collectivistic cultures tend to manage privacy more strictly than American users (Marshall et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011). Our study also finds a coherent interpretation through the model of cultural manifestation that CPM theory suggests. However, we should note that our findings may be partly related to some particular conditions. The selection of winter vacation gave much weight to time spent with family, which may partially explain why Chinese participants' privacy management was so much tighter than American participants'. The selection of college-age users, who are in the life stage of grappling with increasingly complex relationships, highlighted the need to manage privacy to attain the desired state of online relationships. This might also serve to magnify the gap of permeability control between American and Chinese participants, given their contrasting relationships with SNS friends. Therefore, a similar study of other interaction contexts or demographics might yield different patterns.

Because of this limited generalizability, it is important to expand the exploration through large-scale surveys or qualitative studies covering a wider range of interaction contexts and demographics. Most important, future research should include SNS users from different age groups, because intergenerational value shifts (Inglehart, 1977) may lead to variations in SNS privacy practices and different patterns of cultural manifestation. Moreover, Inglehart and Baker (2000) pointed out that compared to other advanced industrial countries, American society features a value system that is generally far more traditional. Bell (2010) found that Chinese society, despite fast economic growth, seems to welcome a rejuvenation of Confucian traditions. In this sense, both the United States and China might be unique in terms of the persistence of traditional values, which necessitates future exploration of SNS privacy and culture in other national cultural contexts.

Despite the limitations, our study is meaningful to research on SNS privacy and culture. Empirically, the study examined users' lived experiences, offering data on actual SNS privacy practices that were largely missing from prior cross-cultural comparisons. Theoretically, it shows the applicability of CPM theory to the investigation of the cultural specificity of SNS privacy practices, broadening the approach of cultural interpretations in this area. Our interpretation suggests that users' privacy practices may be necessitated by social distances with SNS friends, which are in turn conditioned by culture, and that cultural resources may help to justify privacy rules. The cultural connection demonstrates the particular advantage of CPM theory, which contextualizes individual privacy practices within relational dynamics, for the understanding of culturally specific SNS privacy practices.

Our study may also offer some insight for the policy debate over the globalization of privacy standards. A close reading of our data reveals a pattern of cross-vergence in that the participants' privacy practices were embedded in their respective cultures, but they all engaged in active, conscious, and rule-based privacy management to meet their privacy needs. The convergent aspect of privacy practices may reflect the shared technological condition of SNSs, which raises similar concerns for users around the world (Park, 2008). This aspect perhaps also relates to the pervasive cultural change that modernity, which recognizes the importance of individual autonomy, brings to society (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). More important, it tells us that the need for privacy is culturally universal (Altman, 1977). Policy makers should indeed provide basic protection of SNS users' privacy from corporate power, the state, and other users, no matter the society. However, policy solutions cannot simply follow a fixed set of global standards because privacy practices are culturally specific. We recognize the importance of cross-national privacy policy frameworks to the global information economy, but it is also important to consider Park's (2008) insight that such frameworks should be "poly-centric" (p. 69). International policy solutions need to incorporate localized policies as informed by users' actual privacy practices and the cultural values behind them. In summary, Internet privacy policy may benefit from acknowledging that "cultures do share a minimal conception of privacy and all have some rich conception of it as well" (Mizutani et al., 2004, p. 127).

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