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Tong Meng

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“Fair-skinned, young and slim” or “Kardashian-style”: UK-based female Chinese international students’ self-presentation on mobile dating applications

Tong Meng 

School of Education, Durham University, Durham

ABSTRACT

Mobile dating applications (MDAs), ubiquitous dating platforms worldwide, have revolutionized ways by which individuals establish intimate relationships. While scholars extensively studied self-presentation on MDAs, primarily focusing on Western gay males in a single cultural context, little attention has been paid to female migrants’ online self-presentation in cross-cultural contexts. Based on 30 semi-structured interviews, this research adopted Adam Isaiah Green’s sexual field framework to investigate UK-based female Chinese international students’ self-presentation on MDAs. Findings suggested that, in the UK, most participants presented more full-body less-beautified outdoor photos than in China. They attributed the changes to their transient migration to the UK, a “period of empowerment” that enabled them to resist the Chinese patriarchal beauty standards—fair-skinned, young and slim (baiyoushou 白幼瘦). However, this research argues that transnational mobility did not shelter these women free from the male gaze and patriarchal beauty standards. Western patriarchal beauty standards, especially the Kardashian-style body image, largely impacted these women’s self-presentation in the UK. Non-compliance with Western beauty standards subjected participants to body shaming and marginalization on Western MDAs. This research sheds light on the intricate interplay between digital self-presentation, female (dis)empowerment and transnational mobility among female Chinese international students.

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Introduction

Self-presentation, or impression management, is widely observed in people’s social life and relational development. In Erving Goffman’s (1959) initial conceptualization, the primary focus was on individuals’ self-presentation during face-to-face interactions. In a digital era, self-presentation is a condition for participation online, which plays an even more important role in people’s communication (Denise Tse-Shang Tang 2017). Especially for photo-driven online dating platforms such as

CONTACT Tong Meng  tong.meng2@durham.ac.uk  School of Education, Durham University, Stockton Rd, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

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mobile dating applications (MDAs), self-presentation influences the possibility of establishing relationships and serves as a gateway to potential in-person meetings (Nicole B Ellison, Jeffrey T Hancock and Catalina L Toma 2011). Online settings allow people more space to revise their self-presentation and create an “ideal self” than offline meetings (Jing Li and Jonathan P Bowen 2022). Numerous researchers thus have examined people’s strategies and deceptive practices in self-presentation on online dating platforms (e.g., Giulia Ranzini and Christoph Lutz 2017; Janelle Ward 2016).

However, the extant research mainly focused on Western male individuals’ self-presentation, with very little research on non-Western migrants’ online self-presentation in the transnational context (Xu Chen 2020; Khai Shin Yap 2021), let alone female migrants. Living in a new sociocultural context, migrants are likely to reshape their self-presentation to facilitate adaptation and acculturation (Chen 2019). Simultaneously, their self-presentation is also influenced by the cultural norms of their home country (Yap 2021). Investigating female migrants’ online self-presentation offers insights into how they navigate between various cultural norms and how migration influences their (dis)empowerment in the host country.

Female migrants’ self-presentation and (dis)empowerment experiences are reflections of their living situation in the host country. Although some studies suggest that migration can empower women by providing education, employment and independence, others highlight the unique challenges they encounter such as gender-based violence and discrimination (Syed Raza Shah Gilani, Ali Mohammed Al-Matrooshi and Aisha Nayab Qureshi 2023). These disempowering experiences are particularly evident in intimate contexts such as dating, where women must navigate intersections of gender, culture, and migration-related issues (Xi Chen 2018). Despite technological advancement, far too little attention has been paid to how female migrants present themselves online and how online platforms contribute to their (dis)empowerment in transnational contexts. MDAs provide a unique digital space to examine the dynamics of female migrants’ self-presentation and (dis)empowerment.

The current research specifically focuses on the digital self-presentation of UK-based female Chinese international students, a group of transient migrants who are “spatially unsettled and transnationally mobile” (Catherine Gomes 2021, 649). Chinese international students constitute the largest group of overseas students in UK higher education (HESA, 2023), among which female students consistently exceed the number of male students (Siqi Zhang and Cora Lingling Xu 2020). Although research has shown that international students struggle with face-to-face self-presentation (Abu Kamara 2017), it remains unclear how they navigate online self-presentation when establishing intimate relationships in a transnational context.

Drawing on data collected through 30 semi-structured interviews, this research aims to address two questions: 1) How do female Chinese international students in the UK negotiate and manage their self-presentation on MDAs? 2) What is the reasoning behind their self-presentation on MDAs? This research sheds light on the ongoing discussion regarding the intersection of technology, migration and female (dis)empowerment in self-presentation. The findings raised our caution regarding post-feminism discourse,

which suggests that females now are endowed with agency and choice (Rosalind Gill 2007).

Literature review

Self-presentation and male gaze in online settings

According to Goffman (1959), self-presentation indicates controlling other people's impressions by manipulating personal attributes. While self-presentation in Goffman's (1959) book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* exclusively refers to face-to-face social interactions, scholars have extensively studied digital self-presentation since the emergence of computer-mediated communication, with research expanding across various online platforms including MDAs (Nancy K Baym 2015; Shangwei Wu and Daniel Trottier 2022). Unlike offline communications embedded with verbal and nonverbal cues, online communications take place with reduced nonverbal cues, which enables individuals to control and adapt their self-presentation more easily than offline communications (Ward 2017). For example, MDAs are characterized by "reduced cues and increased control in profile construction" (Ward 2017). Due to limited text space and the number of photos that users can upload, MDA users must strategically manage their self-presentation to attract matches.

Self-presentation online reflects how women understand and navigate beauty in a digital era (Lingwei Shao 2023), where mainstream beauty standards and the influence of the male gaze continue to shape their self-presentation. The concept of the male gaze illustrated that men are the active lookers but women are often regarded as passive objects to be looked at (Kelly Oliver 2017). Women are generally subjected to greater scrutiny than men regarding their physical appearance. In most cultures, women are, therefore, predominantly valued based on their beauty (Naomi Wolf 2013). Thus, women often strive to achieve ideal body images defined by men. Instead of mitigating the effects of the male gaze, the development of digital technologies often reinforces it and further shifts it to women's self-surveillance and self-objectification. For example, Catalina L Toma, Jeffrey T Hancock and Nicole B Ellison (2008) suggested that women were more likely than men to alter their physical appearances and use photographic strategies to beautify their photos on MDAs.

The male gaze significantly shaped mainstream female beauty standards in the digital era. On social platforms, users can observe the popularity of specific female beauty standards through likes, shares, and algorithmic promotion. Female users are likely to internalize these beauty ideals shaped by the male gaze and accordingly modify their online self-presentation to conform to these standards (Yiran Dang 2022). This gendered power dynamic is particularly salient on most digital dating platforms where users must present themselves through profiles to attract potential daters.

Researchers emphasized that people's self-presentation is not permanent and stable but subject to change (Ward 2016). When migrating to a different cultural context, individuals may change their online self-presentation to align with the social and cultural norms of the new environment. For example, some Chinese migrants began to upload less-edited photos taken in outdoor settings on MDAs after living in Australia, as authentic self-presentation aligns with local cultural norms that value authenticity (Xu Chen 2021).

To date, however, there is a dearth of research on female transient migrants' self-presentation on MDAs in a transnational context. Given the significance of self-presentation on MDAs—the ubiquitous platforms for young people to pursue romantic relationships—this research aims to further explore this issue by examining how female Chinese international students manage their self-presentation on MDAs and what is the reasoning behind their self-presentation on MDAs.

Transnational mobility and female migrants' (dis)empowerment

Transnational mobility has long been considered a means of empowering female migrants, particularly those from developing countries, by offering opportunities for liberation and autonomy that were previously unavailable in their home countries (Değer Eryar, Hasan Tekgüç and Sule Toktas 2020). However, an increasing number of scholars reveal the complexities behind it, noting that such mobility can also disempower female migrants (e.g., Chen 2018; Youna Kim 2013). Since women's self-presentation on dating applications is largely influenced by gender norms and experiences of intimacy, it is crucial to examine how transnational mobility influences their (dis)empowerment in these areas.

For female migrants from East Asia (e.g., China, Japan and Korea), Western societies are often depicted as offering greater freedom and opportunities than their home countries, empowering them to escape from patriarchy and subordinate roles in intimate relationships (Goncalo Santos and Stevan Harrell 2017). For example, transnational mobility enables female Chinese international students in Australia to explore premarital sexual relationships—an experience sometimes considered immoral within Chinese families and public culture (Fran Martin 2021). Furthermore, the geographical distance from China temporarily suspends the normative life course for women that they could otherwise face, such as the expectation to marry by their mid-twenties and prioritize family care which are deeply rooted in Confucian ideas (Martin 2021).

However, the empowerment brought by transnational mobility is partial. Patriarchal gender norms remain deeply embedded in Western societies, where men continue to dominate in intimate relationships (Martin 2021). Transnational mobility sometimes reinforces unequal gender roles and exposes them to discrimination and vulnerability (Kim 2013). For example, female Chinese migrants in the US often face an increased burden of domestic responsibilities in interracial relationships, as they are expected to be grateful for marrying Western men (Kim 2013). In other words, racial hierarchy and enduring patriarchy in the host country contribute to these females' "twice marginalization" (Kim 2013, 88).

In particular, disempowerment is more pronounced among transient female migrants, such as international students, who often hold time-limited visas and navigate uncertain future trajectories (Gomes 2021). Their experiences are different from first- and second-generation female migrants who often benefit from stronger community networks and institutional ties to the host countries (Qing Tingting Liu and Angie Y Chung 2023). Transient migration status itself may restrict these women's understanding of gender and dating norms in the host country, making them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and uncertainty in self-presentation within interracial relationships (Huabing Liu

2021). Despite the growing number of transient migrants, research examining their experience of (dis)empowerment in dating contexts is very limited.

In the digital age, technology and social media profoundly influence female migrants' lives in the host countries. The extant research has revealed how social media empower female migrants' public awareness, offering them opportunities to report migration issues and establishing transnational connections (e.g., Linh Le-Phuong, Lutgard Lams and Rozane De Cock 2022; İlke Şanlıer Yüksel 2024). However, there is a limited understanding of female migrants' experiences of digital (dis)empowerment in the context of dating. Conducting interviews with Chinese migrants in Australia, Xu Chen and Tingting Liu (2021) found that female participants felt digitally empowered to edit their dating profiles on MDAs and select potential partners based on specific racial preferences. Yet, more detailed insights are needed to learn how female migrants manage their self-presentation on dating platforms, as it reflects their (dis)empowerment in gender roles and intimate relationships.

Sexual field, sexual capital and beauty standards

According to Bourdieu, a field is “a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Loïc J D Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu 1992, 97). To enhance positions in the field, individuals need to compete for capital—the currency of the field determining individuals' positions (Michael Grenfell 2009). Built on this theory and Goffman's (1959) concept of “presentation of self,” Adam Isaiah Green (2008, 2014) formulated the sexual field framework to explain individuals' sexual desires (i.e., the traits that individuals desire from partners) and desirability (i.e., the traits that individuals need to attract partners) in intimate lives. Researchers have applied sexual field framework to analyze gay users' dating practices (Shangwei Wu and Daniel Trottier 2021) and features of various MDAs (Hannah Regan 2021).

A sexual field refers to a social space where individuals who possess different degrees of desirability (i.e., sexual capital) gather to pursue intimate relationships (Adam Isaiah Green 2022). In each sexual field, individual desires aggregate to form a structure of desire, which is “site-specific, transpersonal valuations of attractiveness that coordinate desirability” (Green 2013, 14). The structure of desire determines what traits are desirable in the sexual field, thereby influencing the distribution of sexual capital among individuals. One of the most visible manifestations of the structure of desire is beauty standard, determining which physical traits are valued within the field.

Sexual capital includes appearance (e.g., body shape, height), affect presentation (e.g., gestural repertoires that communicate masculinity and femininity), and sociocultural style, including dress and accessories which communicate race, class and gender (Green 2014). On photo-driven online dating platforms such as MDAs, physical appearance is a key element of sexual capital that largely influences an individual's attractiveness to others. Since sexual capital is field-dependent (Green 2014), migrants may experience a revaluation of their sexual capital as they navigate various beauty standards across transnational contexts. For Chinese female migrants in the West, this revaluation is influenced by the contrast between Chinese and Western beauty ideals.

In China, beauty standards have evolved throughout history, shaping the contemporary mainstream ideal of *baiyoushou* 白幼瘦 – fair-skinned, young and slim. Fair skin has

been long associated with perceptions of delicacy, chastity and higher social class since farmers and laborers usually had dark skin due to sun exposure (Shao 2023; Evelyn Yeung 2015). Slimness has also predominated throughout much of China's history, though the Tang Dynasty temporarily celebrated plump and curvaceous features (Kyō Chō 2012). Slimness is tied to notions of vulnerability, submissiveness and femininity that can strengthen male dominance, which is favored by Confucian gender ethics (Chō 2012; Yuanhang Liu and Xinjian Li 2023; Hua Ma 2025). In recent decades, K-pop culture has further reinforced Chinese women's appreciation of extreme slimness, as Korean idols often maintain exceptionally slim physiques to appear fascinating in front of the camera (Yunshan Zhong 2023). Furthermore, youthfulness is not only about age but also emphasizes a childlike (*youtai* 幼态) aesthetic that embodies innocence or vulnerability. This preference is largely influenced by Japanese manga that values innocence and childishness (Liu and Li 2023; Yurika Nishiyama 2016).

In contrast, beauty standards in Western countries such as the UK and the US tend to be different from those in China. Since the 19th century, fuller figures have been devaluated in favor of slimness, with women often wearing corsets to achieve unrealistic hourglass shapes (David Kunzle 2004). The early 2000s saw the rise of the Victoria's Secret ideal, which further reinforced thinness, emphasizing flat stomachs and toned physiques (Alissa Chiat 2021). Since the 2010s, this beauty ideal has been challenged with the rise of Kim Kardashian, a social media and reality TV star who promoted the "Kardashian-style" beauty image. This beauty preference, characterized by tanned skin, large breasts and round buttocks, significantly influenced Western women's ideal body type (Chiat 2021). Furthermore, social movements such as the UK's Body Confidence Campaign and the US's Body Positivity Movement have emerged to challenge these narrow beauty standards and promote more diverse body images (Fran Amery 2019).

Given different beauty standards, female Chinese international students may accordingly change their self-presentation such as beautifying photos to conform to the structure of desire in the host country (Lisa Wade 2021). I thus conceptualize dating space in China as the Chinese sexual field and the one in the UK as the Western sexual field. The term "Western" is translated from participants' use of "*xifang* 西方," mainly referring to "European and American." Within these two sexual fields, the dominant structure of desire is likely to be different due to various cultural norms and social values. What is valued as sexual capital in the Chinese sexual field may be considered a sexual liability in the Western sexual field. Students' sexual capital thus may be re-evaluated, leading to shifts in their positions within the sexual field. Living temporarily in a transnational context, students are likely to move between these two sexual fields when managing their self-presentation on MDAs.

Methods

Data in this research was drawn from online semi-structured interviews with 30 heterosexual female Chinese international students from July to December 2022. I recruited participants using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Alan Bryman 2016). I first posted advertisements on Chinese social media (e.g., Weibo and Red) and successfully recruited 25 participants. I then invited these participants to introduce other females who met the selection criteria of this research. The selection criteria included being over 18,

being current users of MDAs, self-identifying as Chinese international students, and having been using MDAs for over three months in the UK. The interview topics included their self-presentation on MDAs during migration and their understanding of beauty standards in China and in the UK.

All participants were aged between 19 and 30 years old and grew up in China with intermediate middle-class family backgrounds (David S G Goodman 2014). At the time of interviewing, 21 participants were single and 9 were non-single. They used multiple MDAs in the UK including Tantan, Tinder, Soul, Tashuo, Jimu, Bumble, Hinge and Coffee Meet Bagel. Each interview was conducted on Zoom in Chinese and lasted from 40 to 120 minutes, and the transcripts were then translated into English by the researcher. All participants preferred using voice calls which were recorded with their consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. I used thematic analysis to analyze the data with the assistance of the software Atlas.ti (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2012).

Findings and discussions

Self-presentation on MDAs in China: exquisite face-disclosure photos featuring indoor activities

When sharing their self-presentation in the UK, many participants compared it with how they presented themselves on MDAs in China. In China, most participants used to upload beautified face-disclosure photos featuring indoor activities, which were inextricably shaped by Chinese *baiyoushou* (Fair-skinned, young and slim) beauty standards and traditional gender norms. For example, Min (24 years old) said,

I made my photos very pretty, exquisite and perfect when I was in China. I used Meitu (a photo-editing software founded in China) to draw eyelashes to make my eyes bigger. I even used the pen to fill each pore on my face. Does it sound crazy and hilarious? I don't do it anymore after living in the UK. I keep the texture of my skin as real.

Most participants echoed Min's sentiment and used various photo-editing applications to make them look *baiyoushou* on MDAs in China. Indeed, photo-editing software such as Meitu and Qingyan are must-have applications for many young women in China (Shao 2023). These applications have various functions such as smoothing, slimming, and toning to adjust people's skin texture, body shape and skin color. As participants further explained, they posted beautified photos because the beauty standard for women in China is "strict," "homogenous (*qutong* 趋同)" and "uniform (*yizhi* 一致)," that is, most Chinese men prefer *baiyoushou* women.

Failing to achieve such an ideal beauty standard, many participants were often judged and rejected by Chinese male users on MDAs. For example, Min (24 years old) received lots of malicious comments about her body shape, such as "Fat girl, you should lose your weight," and "Your arms are as thick as my legs." Ivy (24 years old) was commented as "too fat and strong" by Chinese men on MDAs. Being unable to conform to *baiyoushou* reduced these participants' desirability in the sexual field (Green 2014). They thus strategically presented beautified photos to increase the sexual capital they projected to others,

even if they may not possess such capital offline. By doing so, they were likely to enhance their positions in the sexual field and receive more likes on MDAs. However, considering potential offline meetings, some participants endeavored to accumulate such sexual capital in real life such as losing weight and whitening their skin. Five out of thirty participants even had an eating disorder when trying to lose weight in China. For example, Innocent (30 years old) said,

I was very unconfident about my body shape in China. Lots of Chinese men on MDAs judged my appearance and body. I only ate one meal a day to lose weight. I felt hungry at night before sleep, and I could not stop eating snacks. After doing that, I felt guilty and depressed so I induced vomiting. That was a vicious cycle and a nightmare for me.

Similar to Innocent, Eve (23 years old) struggled with anorexia after receiving negative feedback about her body shape on MDAs and offline in China. Results from prior research corroborated that MDA users were more likely to adopt unhealthy eating patterns and develop eating disorders compared to those who did not use it (Bijie Tie, Yinuo Xu, Shuqi Cui and Jinbo He 2024). This can be attributed to the design feature of most MDAs, which prioritizes physical appearance in users' profiles.

The *baiyoushou* beauty standard in China also influenced the type of photos participants uploaded to their profiles. 16 out of 30 participants only uploaded beautified face-disclosure photos on MDAs in China since they believed their body shape did not align with the *baiyoushou* beauty standard. For example, Min (24 years old) never posted full-body photos because she was once labelled as “*tank*坦克” by Chinese daters online due to being considered overweight, which triggered her appearance anxiety. During a live stream in 2020, a Chinese male university student used “*tank*” to describe the body shape of two Chinese females he saw on campus. This word was then adopted by some Chinese males to stigmatize females they perceived as overweight. Beyond body-shaming, participants also avoided body-disclosure photos due to the risk of sexual harassment. Cui (25 years old) only uploaded face-disclosure photos after receiving harassing comments such as, “Do you want to sleep with me? How much do you want for a night?” when she posted a full-body photo wearing a tank top on MDAs. Harassing comments from males towards female users on MDAs are not rare (Charlotte Hackett and Natalia Gerodetti 2023; Laura Thompson 2018). The sexual harassment and judgement that participants experienced contributed to their anxiety and insecurity, which accordingly influenced the types of photos they uploaded on MDAs in China.

Some participants further shared that the judgments from family members also prevented them from posting body-disclosure photos on MDAs and resulted in their body shame. For instance, Liu (19 years old) recounted her experience:

When I was in China, my mother judged my body shape and urged me to lose weight every time she called me. She thought I was too heavy and doubted whether any males would be interested in dating me. Her malicious words made me feel very inferior and I believed that I was a fat and ugly girl. That's why I never uploaded photos showing my body on MDAs and I tried to lose weight.

Liu's mother internalized the patriarchal beauty standards in China and exerted pressure on Liu to lose weight. This behavior reveals how patriarchal beauty standards are perpetuated through intergenerational relationships in Chinese families (Santos and Harrell 2017). Liu felt compelled to conform to male-dominated beauty standards and disciplined

her body to meet her mother's expectations. She then refused to upload body-disclosure photos on MDAs until she felt satisfied with her weight.

In addition, participants were more likely to present photos featuring indoor activities such as drawing and flower arranging in China. Dailu (26 years old) said: "Most Chinese men like fair-skinned and tender (*wenwan*温婉) women. Thus, I posted some photos of myself drawing which made me look very tender and quiet (*wenjing*文静)." Similarly, Hannah (23 years old) uploaded some photos of herself drawing and doing flower arrangements, which she found were appealing to Chinese men. "Doing flower arrangements or drawing can show my tender characteristics. Chinese men like it," said Hannah. Indeed, tenderness and nurturing are key traits of femininity in contemporary China (Arianne Gaetano 2014), which can generally increase females' attractiveness in the dating market. Tenderness and quietness align with traditional Confucian ideas in China, which emphasize that women should be subordinate to men—whether their fathers, husbands, or sons (Xiyang Wang 2017). From Dailu's and Hannah's responses, presenting photos of certain hobbies was important for them to increase their desirability, alongside presenting their appearance and body shape. The pursuit of feminine personality traits indicated the influence of the male gaze and persistent patriarchal expectations, not only on physical attributes but also on participants' presentation of personal characteristics through photos.

Migration as a period of empowerment: resisting baiyoushou 白幼瘦 (Fair-skinned, young and slim) beauty standards

After coming to the UK, 20 participants mentioned a salient change they experienced in managing their self-presentation: preferring to use "natural" full-body photos taken in outdoor settings. "Natural (*ziran*自然)" means unaltered or minimally retouched photos (Chen 2021). They perceived the time in the UK as a period of empowerment, which enabled them to escape from the Chinese patriarchal beauty standards and present a more "natural" self than in China. For example, Jane (20 years old) said: "The environment of the UK gave me the power to be myself." Specifically, the participants presented photos with three key characteristics in the UK: outdoor settings, minimal beautification, and body disclosure. Almost all participants uploaded body-disclosure photos in their profiles because they perceived the beauty standard in the UK as more "diverse" than that in China. This was exemplified with Liuyu's (27 years old) account.

The beauty standard here is more diverse and tolerant (*baorong*包容) than in China. I don't have body shame anymore in the UK. Many people thought I was too fat in China, but I was not that fat in the UK. I see different body shapes in the UK and people won't judge each other.

18 participants echoed Liuyu's experience and perceived beauty standards in the UK as more "diverse," "tolerant" and "open" than those in China, which accordingly reduced their body shaming and increased their confidence in posting full-body photos on MDAs. This perception was mainly based on their observations of diverse body shapes in the UK. For example, Amy (23 years old) said: "In China, I buy extra-large clothes, but I only need to wear clothes of medium size in the UK. This relieved my anxiety about weight. I am not very fat here." The extant research indeed indicated that Chinese populations generally have a smaller body frame than European people (James Webster and Jeremy Cornolo

2013). The differences in body size and body frame increased some participants' confidence and reduced their appearance anxiety, especially those who were judged as "fat" in China. Being exposed to various body shapes and skin colors in the UK, participants felt that they were freed from the patriarchal *baiyoushou* beauty standard.

In addition, nine participants said that the Western beauty standard was "healthier" than *baiyoushou* beauty standard which many of their peers in China pursued. They perceived that Western beauty standards endorsed attributes like being tanned and toned. Indeed, thinness in Western beauty standards often emphasizes muscularity and fitness, such as a toned body, which contrasts with the Chinese ideal of fragility (Kanako Ando, Francesca E Giorgianni, Elisa S Danthinne and Rachel F Rodgers 2021). By embracing and showing openness to a "healthier" appearance and beauty standard, these participants distinguish themselves from peers in China and construct a global identity (Zhang and Xu 2020).

Many participants also emphasized their upward mobility in the UK, as they received more positive comments on their appearances on MDAs here than in China. Emma (22 years old) said:

Back in China, I lacked confidence because my mother and male friends frequently commented that I was too fat and ate too much. But I got entirely contrasting comments in the UK. Male users on MDAs often complimented my appearance, describing me as pretty.

Geographical distance from China enabled Emma to escape from her mother and friends' judgements on her body shape. Like Emma, 20 participants who did not conform to *baiyoushou* beauty standards and were often judged as "fat" began to upload body-disclosure photos in the UK. Although they were perceived as overweight according to Chinese beauty standards, their body shape was often appreciated by Western daters in the UK. In other words, their physical attributes were valued as sexual capital in the UK which in turn increased their desirability in the Western sexual field (Green 2015).

Furthermore, 17 participants presented more outdoor photos showing their engagement in sports activities on MDAs in the UK than in China. By observing other female MDA users' profiles on MDAs, the participants found that unaltered outdoor photos were a popular style of self-presentation on Western MDAs. Indeed, Western feminist movements such as the US body positivity movement encouraged females to present natural and unedited photos on social media (Chiat 2021). Dailu (26 years old) presented skiing photos on her profiles in the UK because she believed that "most Western men like women who are outgoing and sporty with a good body shape." Similarly, Ling (23 years old) echoed that:

On China-based MDAs, I only present exquisitely beautified selfies in which I retouched my face a lot and wear fancy clothes. However, on Hinge and Bumble, I present unbeautified body-disclosure photos of myself doing sports such as skiing, skateboarding and paragliding.

Ling perceived that male users on Western MDAs cared more about daters' body shape, hobbies and what type of sports they do rather than only focusing on the face. The extant research resonated with Dailu and Ling's experiences, indicating that Western countries generally emphasized female bodily beauty but people in Eastern countries pay more attention to facial beauty (Katherine Frith, Ping Shaw and Hong Cheng 2005).

Females in this research regarded Western female users' presentation of unbeautified or less-retouched photos as a powerful expression of their "natural" (*ziran* 自然) and real (*zhenshi* 真实) selves. Such self-presentation was adopted by most participants and seen as a form of resistance against the patriarchal *baiyoushou* beauty standard in China. For example, Cui (24 years old) mentioned:

I present photos without makeup, showing my body and muscles without beautification in the UK. Showing a real self is a way to say no to *baiyoushou* patriarchal beauty standards. I am who I am and I don't want to change my appearance to meet an ideal image created by men.

Nine participants echoed Cui's experiences and received many likes and matches from MDA users without editing their photos to be *baiyoushou*. These participants did not conform to *baiyoushou* beauty standards but instead possessed a plump body shape and darker skin, traits that are appreciated in Western beauty ideals. Transnational mobility provides them with possibilities to escape from entrenched *baiyoushou* beauty standards. In other words, these participants' sexual capital was more highly valued in the UK than in China when *baiyoushou* was not the mainstream beauty standard.

Pitfalls of empowerment: conforming to Western patriarchal beauty standards

Most participants of this research perceived that they were empowered regarding self-presentation on MDAs in the UK, as they began to show a more "real" self (i.e., with less beautification) than in China. However, uploading less beautified photos did not mean leaving them unaltered. Many participants still edited their photos, though their focus shifted from face to body shape. Such self-presentation was arguably shaped by Western patriarchal beauty standards and disempowered them in self-presentation. Although escaping from the *baiyoushou* beauty standards, transnational mobility exposed them to the Western beauty standards, which some participants struggled to achieve.

The Kardashian style was particularly mentioned by seven participants, which they believed was a popular ideal body image in most Western countries such as the US and the UK. Seven participants of the current research felt that conforming to Kim Kardashian's style can increase their desirability on MDAs. For example, Ling (23 years old) said "I know the recent Western trendy aesthetics is Kardashian-style. So I focused on breast and buttock enlargement and lip augmentation while using photo-editing software." KK (23 years old) also chose to retouch her waist, hip and buttocks to avoid being judged by daters. She said:

Although I think I am not a slim person in China. I was often judged by Western men saying that my body was too slim, flat and not sexy. I retouched my photos to have a thick lip and firm and round buttocks because I think Kardashian's body shape is appreciated by most Western men. Asian women usually have flat buttocks which makes our body shape not good-looking.

Being unable to conform to Kardashian body image not only reduced participants' desirability on MDAs but also subjected them to judgements. Daisy (23 years old) also received judgements about her slim body shape from Western men:

Some White men asked me “Do you eat anything every day? Why are you so skinny? What do you eat for your meals?” In fact, I am considered not slim enough by Chinese men, yet my body is skinny and unhealthy in Western beauty standards. You know the Kardashian beauty standard has been a trend in Western countries. That’s why I am not very popular in Western MDAs.

Transnational mobility subjected Daisy to a liminal space where she struggled to meet the unrealistic beauty ideals of both Western and Chinese cultures, facing judgements from both Chinese and Western men. After frequently encountering such negative comments, Daisy started to retouch her photos in the UK, particularly altering her body shape to appear plump. She specifically used the function “body” in Meitu to enlarge her legs, hips and chest. As mentioned earlier, the Western ideal beauty standards typically associate thinness with muscularity, favoring a muscular and toned physique (Rachel F Rodgers, Debra L Franko, Meghan E Lovering, Stephanie Luk, Wendy Pernal and Atsushi Matsumoto 2018). Daisy and KK were not slim enough in Chinese men’s eyes, yet their body shape also failed to meet the toned and plump beauty standard in the UK.

Although these participants stopped retouching their photos to be *baiyoushou*, they were compelled to conform to the Western ideal body image to increase attractiveness and avoid judgements on Western MDAs. This is particularly evident for participants who preferred dating Western men during their study in the UK. Their transient living status with time-limited visas intensifies the need to conform to Western beauty standards in pursuit of interracial relationships (Gomes 2021), as they fear there will be fewer opportunities to establish interracial relationships upon returning to China. Rather than fully emancipating themselves from the patriarchal beauty standards, these participants’ self-presentation is influenced by Western patriarchal beauty standards.

For those participants who aligned with *baiyoushou* beauty standard in China, retouching their bodies and changing clothing styles were even more crucial in the UK. Before editing their photos, these participants experienced “downward mobility” when dating Western men in the UK (James Farrer and Sonja Dale 2014, 164). In other words, the sexual capital they possessed in China such as slimness and youthfulness are frequently devalued in the Western sexual field. For example, L (21 years old) said

I was popular in the Chinese dating market as my appearance conforms to Chinese *baiyoushou* beauty standards. However, these same physical characteristics made me not very competitive in the dating market in the UK. I received fewer likes on Western MDAs than on China-based ones. I guess that is because my body shape was not that sexy, healthy and plump in Western aesthetics.

The participants who were perceived as *baiyoushou* in China were in a marginalized position in the Western sexual field because they failed to conform to the mainstream structure of desire (i.e., toned and curvy) in the UK. According to Green (2015), the sexual capital owned by individuals is not fixed but field-dependent. *Baiyoushou* physical attributes were highly valued in the Chinese sexual field but became a liability in the Western sexual field. Thus, these participants were compelled to retouch their photos to increase their desirability on Western MDAs.

As aforementioned, some participants changed the type of photos they presented on MDAs (i.e., uploading more body-disclosure photos in the UK) due to their perceived “tolerant” beauty standards in the UK. However, this perceived tolerance concealed

a different form of beauty standard enforcement. Many participants' change in self-presentation was not a freedom of choice but rather driven by Western beauty standards. Min (24 years old) used to present face-disclosure photos on MDAs in China, but she was compelled to present more photos showing her body in the UK. "When I presented photos which only showed my face, Western people often commented and asked me 'Where is your body? Is there nothing under your neck?' Maybe that is a joke but I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed." Only posting face-disclosure photos subjected Min to negative comments and judgements which led to her adaptation of self-presentation.

In addition, H (22 years old) changed the style of her photos and outfit after coming to the UK.

I initially posted some very cute photos where I made certain facial expressions to pretend to be youthful (*zhuangnen* 装嫩). However, I received very few likes on Western MDAs. I then consulted some local men about their aesthetic preferences. They told me that Western men are not attractive to women who look very youthful. Especially if you show pictures where you wear a JK (Joshi Kousei) uniform or appear very cute, they may be suspicious that you are underage and not send likes to you.

Thus, H began to edit photos to portray a mature and sexy image in the UK and changed her clothing style. She specifically enlarged her breasts and wore tank tops and tight dresses rather than JK skirts. She then received more likes from White men. Similarly, the participants who preferred dating Asian men in the UK were not fully empowered by transnational mobility regarding self-presentation on MDAs either. Despite being geographically distant from China, they found it difficult to resist the *baiyoushou* beauty standards if they wished to attract Asian partners. "Asian" here refers to migrants from East Asia (e.g., Chinese, Korean and Japanese) rather than South Asian people in the UK context. Ivy (24 years old) said:

I haven't noticed significant changes regarding the photos I upload to MDAs in the UK. I still beautify my face and body as before because I prefer dating Chinese men. You know most of them like *baiyoushou* women. I feel compelled to use Meitu to edit my photos to fit that standard.

Migration to the UK did not completely shield Ivy from Chinese patriarchal beauty standards, as her self-presentation still conforms to *baiyoushou*. As Green (2015) said, individual desires aggregate to form a structure of desire in the sexual field which determines who is desirable and who is not. Given that Chinese men constitute the majority of users on China-based MDAs, the structure of desire for these applications still leans on the *baiyoushou* beauty standards.

Although all participants experienced transnational mobility, their choices in self-presentation on MDAs varied—some aligned more with Western beauty standards, while others adhered to the Chinese *baiyoushou* ideal. These differences were influenced by their racial preferences in dating and their positions within both Chinese and Western sexual fields. However, fundamentally, their choices were all influenced by beauty standards dictated by men.

Conclusion

This research has examined UK-based female Chinese international students negotiation of self-presentation on MDAs in a transnational context. Findings indicate that most participants changed self-presentation on MDAs in the UK, as they began to upload less-beautified outdoor full-body photos. They credited these changes to transnational mobility, a period of empowerment in their eyes, which enabled them to resist the Chinese patriarchal *baiyoushou* 白幼瘦 (fair-skinned, young and slim) beauty standards. In addition, many of them perceived Western beauty standards as “tolerant” and “diverse,” appreciating and celebrating their physical attributes more than in China.

However, transnational mobility does not fully empower these women in self-presentation. Findings suggested that most participants adapted self-presentation to conform to Western patriarchal beauty standards, especially the Kardashian-style body image. For female participants who preferred dating Asian males on MDAs, they still beautified their photos to be *baiyoushou* in the UK, despite the geographical distance from China. This shows that transnational mobility does not shield these females from the male gaze, instead, it sometimes subjects them to a double-layered pressure. Some participants experienced scrutiny from Chinese men for not conforming to the *baiyoushou* beauty standard, while simultaneously facing judgement from Western men for not being curvy or plump enough. Rather than affording female migrants greater autonomy (Yüksel 2024), technology and media further increased their anxiety and body-shaming. I argue that the male gaze and patriarchal beauty standards continue to disempower female Chinese international students in presenting themselves on MDAs in the UK.

This research enriches the use of the sexual field framework in migration and digital studies, revealing the intersection of gender, cultural norms and migration status in forming female Chinese international students’ self-presentation on MDAs. This research also demonstrates how multiple sexual fields interplay to influence sexual actors’ self-presentation online and form the hierarchy of sexual capital in a transnational context. Nevertheless, the participants of this research are relatively homogenous with middle-class family backgrounds. Future studies could focus on a broad demographic of migrants, encompassing individuals of varying ages from disadvantaged backgrounds in different cultural contexts.

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ORCID

Tong Meng  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4832-2490>

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