Chapter 14
From the Self to the Selfie

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Introduction

The central thesis of this chapter is that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have lived in a social and cultural environment that has undergone fundamental and unprecedented changes resulting from the integration of online infrastructures in the patterns of everyday life conduct.[1] Since then, we have inhabited the online-offline nexus, and while both zones have characteristics of their own, they have deeply influenced each other and must, therefore, be seen as one sociocultural, economic, and political habitat. This habitat is still poorly theorized, since we continue to rely largely on social theories and methodologies, in particular, theories of the Self, which have been developed to account for patterns and structures characterizing offline conduct. Such theories now need to be complemented by theories of the "Selfie"—the online configurations and performances of identity observable as normal, default modes of collective identity work in the online-offline nexus.

[1] We offer this chapter in memory of our friend and colleague Fons van de Vijver, who, sadly, passed away during the production of this book. The issues discussed in this chapter were a consistent topic of conversation with Fons.

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In what follows, we shall present a number of proposals for addressing the Selfie. These proposals will be grounded in an action-centered perspective on identity—to be explained at length in the next section—which, in our view, is necessitated by a fundamental feature of online social life. The absence of physical copresence in online interaction situations leads to a lack of the mutual monitoring work, which was so central in, for instance, Goffman's studies as a means to achieve *knowledge of the other* (e.g., Goffman, 1966). The other appears online, as we all know, as a technologically mediated avatar of which the "real" features cannot be established through the cues we so generously display in offline interactions. Consequently, in examining online social conduct, knowledge of who the interlocutor is cannot be a priori, but *an effect of concrete social action,* and while performing such actions, knowledge of the other is *presumptive* or even speculative. Such action—interaction, to be precise—needs to be central in any methodologically safe approach to online identity.

We shall illustrate these proposals by means of two analytical vignettes, both taken from research on online identity practices on the Chinese internet. China, it must be underscored, offers the student of digital culture perhaps the richest panorama of phenomena and processes available at present. This is due to the massive spread of online (and mobile) applications, the highly integrated and powerful nature of such applications, and the extraordinarily intense usage of these applications by a large population. Details on this will be offered below. There is another advantage to working on online data from China: the advanced surveillance culture that pervades the Chinese internet and which has often been critically commented upon by outside observers. While this surveillance culture is known and visible in the case of China, it is not exceptional at all. Surveillance culture is omnipresent in the online sphere wherever it occurs, to the extent that Zuboff (2019) speaks of "surveillance capitalism" as the system that we now inhabit.

This omnipresent surveillance culture has an important effect for what follows, since online identities—Selfies—always have two major dimensions: an "inside" one, referring to the collective and interactive identity work performed and inhabited by participants in online social action, and an "outside" one, performed and ascribed by algorithmically configured data fed into user profiles (Haider & Sundin, 2019; Zittrain, 2014). While we all perform intense identity work (i.e., to regulate others' perceptions of our identities; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Watson, 2008) whenever we operate online, we are all simultaneously identified—through data aggregations—by surveillance operators active on a metalevel. There, we get an inversion: While the other is often unknown to everyday actors in everyday online interaction, the data-generated metaconstructions of profiles are all about *full knowledge* of the actor. While we shall be concerned mainly with the "inside" dimension in what follows, one should keep in mind that both dimensions of identity need to be addressed in order to get a comprehensive picture of the Selfie.

An Action-Centered Perspective

Let us reiterate the main reason why we opt for an action-centered perspective on online identity work, for it is of great significance methodologically. In online social environments, the "true" identity of actors involved in some form of social action is, by default, a matter of presumption. We assume that we are having a "discussion" with our "online friends," and we notice comments from online friends X, Y, and Z. These online friends may not be (and very often *are* not) people we encounter in the offline sphere; consequently, the only identity we can attribute to them is based on what they themselves show and display to us while we engage in interaction with them.

Such online interaction, as we know (Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Lu, 2020; Varis & Hou, 2020), is:

- Mostly *scripted-designed* and multimodal interaction.
- Performed by people we can identify only on the basis of what their *profile information* reveals; this information can be restricted by privacy settings and can be misleading or outright fake.
- *Curated* in the sense that the actor can modify, edit, reorganize, and even remove the messages deployed in the interaction.
- *Technologically mediated* through the algorithms of the application we are using, ensuring continuously adjusted "bubbles" of participants selected for involvement on data-analytical grounds. So even if we wish to direct our message to, say, all 2536 of our "friends," we can never be sure that all of them will see that message, and we ourselves (the "senders" of the message in traditional communication theory) cannot see who can see our message. Thus, while we are directly chatting with X, Y, and Z, a few hundred others—whom we do not (and cannot) know—may be witnessing the exchanges.
- *Archivable* in several ways: (a) as part of our own archive of stored interactions; (b) converted into user data gathered, ordered, kept, and transformed by app providers, network owners, hardware manufacturers, and security agencies; and (c) dispatched to a market of customers interested in what Zuboff (2019) calls "behavioral futures" (p. 8). It should be noted that this latter form of "recycling" is constant: All online actions are converted into behavioral-predictive data.

Online interaction, seen from that angle, is *nonlinear* and defies common models of communication dependent on the transparency of the communication and its resources, including the participants' identities (individual and collective), the nature of the interaction, and the message and their trajectories as consequential or inconsequential communicative events. Online interaction, we can see, is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and low predictability, which makes it hard to squeeze into ideal-type theoretical models.

Online interaction, however, remains observable as *social action*. And while we can say very little with any degree of a priori certainty about the nature of the interactions, the resources deployed in them, and the individuals and collectives involved

in them, the actions themselves can be used as a lead into all of this, enabling post hoc statements on these aspects of action. Put simply, if we want to know online identities, we need to closely examine online actions.

This heuristic puts us firmly within a long lineage of interactionalist work—a tradition of social thought and methodology with roots in American Pragmatism and Phenomenology, mediated by George Herbert Mead (1934) and Alfred Schütz (1967) and developed by scholars such as Erving Goffman (e.g., 1966, 1974), Herbert Blumer (1969, 2004), Aaron Cicourel (1973), Anselm Strauss (1993), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Harold Garfinkel (1967, 2002), Goodwin (2018), and many others.[2]

A number of principles characterize this tradition:

1. The first and most important principle is that of *interactional co-construction of social facts*—the assumption that whatever we do in social life is done in collaboration, response, or conflict with others. In fact, the people mentioned above argue that one can only talk of social action when it is *inter*action (e.g., Strauss, 1993, p. 21) and, for Blumer (1969), "a society consists of individuals interacting with one another" (p. 7).
2. Interaction is, in turn, "making sense" of social order in concrete situations—this is the second principle. For the scholars mentioned, social order and social structure do not exist in an abstract sense, but are enacted constantly by people in contextualized, situated moments of interaction. In Garfinkel's famous words (1967), in each such moment we perform and co-construct social order "for another first time" (p. 9). In other words, the social is *concrete*, ongoing, and evolving.
3. The third principle is directly derived from Mead and can be summarized as follows: "We see ourselves through the way in which others see and define us" (Blumer, 1969, p. 13). Somewhat more precisely, "organisms in interaction are observing each other's ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action" (Blumer, 2004, p. 18). This is the essence of Mead's understanding of the Self: It is greatly influenced by anticipated responses from the others and adjusted accordingly. The Self can thus never be an essence, a fixed characteristic, an a priori attribute of people; it is a situationally co-constructed performance ratified by others. Of course, Goffman's work has greatly contributed to our understanding of this.
4. Fourth, we do this interactional monitoring and anticipating of the others' responses on the basis of an assumption of *recognizability*. This is when we

[2] The work of scholars listed here has become known under a variety of labels, from "grounded theory" (Strauss) and "social constructivism" (Berger & Luckmann) to "symbolic interactionism" (Blumer), "cognitive sociology" (Cicourel) and "ethnomethodology" (Garfinkel). To all of them, the label "ethnography" can equally be applied. By using the term "interactionist," we point to the fact that these disparate efforts are tied together by the shared basic theoretical principles to be discussed next. The work of Anne Warfield Rawls (e.g., 2002, 2004) is exceptionally insightful in sketching the bigger picture of action-centered epistemologies connecting such different schools.

experience something as meaningful, as something that "makes sense" to us, by recognizing it *as something specific* (cf. Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9), a token of a type of meaningful act that we can ratify as such. These types of acts can be called "genres" (Blommaert, 2018, p. 51); Garfinkel called them "formats" (2002, p. 245), and Goffman (1974) theorized them as "frames."

5. Fifth, all of the preceding have a major implication for how we see the Self, how we theorize it and address it in research. Rawls's (2002) comment on Garfinkel captures it well, and the point can be extended to almost all the work in the tradition addressed here. Individual subjectivity, she writes,

> which had originally been thought of as belonging to the actor, [was relocated] in the regularities of social practices. … [A] population is constituted not by a set of individuals with something in common but by a set of practices common to particular situations or events. (Rawls, 2002, p. 60)

This means that actions generate those who are involved in them, or to quote Rawls (2002) again, we see "situations that provide for the appearances of individuals" (p. 46) and not vice versa. Converted into the vocabulary of this book: *Identities, individual and collective, are effects of social actions* and not their ontological and methodological point of departure. They constitute, as it were, the "personnel" of social actions.[3]

Having sketched the main principles of the action-centered approach we shall use here, our task is now to link it to the specific characteristics of online interactions, as reviewed earlier. Two analytic vignettes will be employed to illustrate how specific forms of interaction will demand and afford specific forms of collective identity work and yield specific identities and thus how the specific nature of online interactions may compel us to focus on identities that are not often seen as essential, "thick," or enduring. But they are identities, to be sure—Selfies rather than Selves. This means that they are concrete, interactionally ratified (and thus *relational*) inhabited-and-ascribed roles in online social action, recognizable as such by others, and constituted from a number of specific identity dimensions.

Becoming an Expert User of Memes

The internet is a mammoth informal learning environment, and *learning* practices, broadly taken, are among the most frequently performed online social actions. Search engine commands are of course cases in point, but even when people engage in discussions, chats, or other forms of "ludic" activities, learning appears as one of the main dimensions of action. Since online environments are also sites of extremely

[3] To make this point very clear, observe that all of this evidently excludes methodological individualism from the theoretical repertoire of the interactionist tradition. See Blommaert (2018, pp. 36–37) for a discussion.

rapid innovation and change, continuous learning needs to be done in order to enter specific groups of users or remain a ratified member of such communities.

We enter the realm here of so-called "light" relationships, identities, and communities, carried along and given substance by means of "light," ludic practices of the kind so often described by Goffman (e.g., 1961, 1966)—practices not often attributed too much importance when seen from the outside, but often experienced as highly salient by participants, and worthy of very considerable efforts (Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Attention to such light phenomena is not a mainstream tactic in disciplines explicitly interested in identities, yet it connects with the interactionist tradition with which we choose to align our approach, in which there is an outspoken interest in the mundane and routine phenomena where social order can be observed and made palpable. We adopt from this tradition the view that the big things in society can be observed and understood in seemingly small and innocuous events.

Let us now turn to some data gathered from Sina Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms (Lu, 2020). As mentioned earlier, China's online infrastructure offers a fertile terrain for the study of digital culture, unmatched perhaps by any other area in the contemporary world. The reasons for this are manifold and range from the sheer scale of the infrastructure (with nearly a billion people using online tools), the level of sophistication of social media platforms (in which functions elsewhere requiring dozens of separate apps are integrated into one platform), and the intensity of use of online infrastructures (notably of social media), to the specific features of Chinese language and culture played out in online activities (Du, 2016; Li, 2018; Lu, 2018; Nie, 2018; Wang, 2017). The latter is of special interest when we feed it back to one of the core features of online interactions: their scripted-designed multimodal nature. The specific characteristics of Chinese script constitute tremendous affordances for wordplay, neologisms, and graphic design based on scriptural elements (Nie, 2018).

Several such affordances are played out in what are known elsewhere as "memes" and as "*Biaoqingbao*" in online China (Lu, 2020).[4] *Biaoqingbao* are (like memes) compound signs consisting of an image and—usually—a caption. Images can be summary, like line drawings, but also intricate and manipulated, as when a celebrity's face is pasted upon a panda bear's head. In every instance, such doctored images convey interactionally recognizable and ratified emotive meanings—anger, surprise, laughter, aggression—but also more finely tuned emotive responses. Captions often use existing Chinese characters with a twist—playing into the homophony of characters to produce sarcastic or ironic wordplay, obscenities, or covert sociopolitical critique—and they sometimes acquire a long and fruitful life as constantly morphing, multifunctional signs (see Du, 2016; Nie, 2018). Memes can become extraordinarily popular, with millions of shares and instances of use, and *Biaoqingbao* designers can become minor online celebrities with a large cohort of

[4] What follows is based on LU Ying's online fieldwork, part of her doctoral research on *Biaoqingbao*, its modes of usage and community of users.

followers whose electronically transmitted cash donations turn *Biaoqingbao* design into a profitable business venture (Lu, 2018). One specific mode of usage of *Biaoqingbao* is in what is known as "*Biaoqingbao* fights," in which interactions are organized around the exchange of *Biaoqingbao*, each time trying to trump (or "defeat") the opponent (Lu, 2020).

We have, in this brief survey of *Biaoqingbao*, already identified identity effects. Highly talented *Biaoqingbao* designers can acquire celebrity status and function as the recognized leaders of a community of followers. In addition, such success can move them into a more prosperous socioeconomic position in Chinese society, outside of the formal economy and labor market. Manufacturing complex, witty, and appealing *Biaoqingbao* is, thus, (to use Bourdieu's, 1993, well-known terms here) an activity that can shift positions in a field, and such position shifts are, in effect, identity shifts as well.

But there is more. The relationship—interactionally ratified relational identities, to be precise—between *Biaoqingbao* makers and their followers, and among members of the user community as well, is characterized by *hierarchies* within a learning community. An example can make this clear.

In 2016, a complex and composite meme appeared on Weibo, displaying fragments of several classic paintings in a certain sequence (Fig. 14.1).[5]

The captions added to the painting fragments describe the emotional value attached to them, in phrases such as "Rembrandt style fright" and "Dutch mannerism onlooking," and in her post, the maker of the *Biaoqingbao* wrote, "Please help yourself to *Biaoqingbao*"—an explicit invitation to start using the memes in the ways she had described.

What followed was a stampede toward these "posh *Biaoqingbao*," with many thousands of people expressing an interest in them and inquiring about specific ways to use them. Such ways, the *Biaoqingbao* maker explained, would bespeak a cultured and sophisticated stance: Using them in online exchanges would suggest an advanced level of education, erudition, and taste. People quickly followed, reposting the original meme, designing and submitting some of their own making, and commenting extensively on the qualities and defects of all of them and offering informed suggestions as to their interpretation and potential of use in *Biaoqingbao* fights. In Garfinkel's (2002) terms, we were observing "instructed action," in which people tried, explored, and implemented each other's suggestions—and most prominently those of the *Biaoqingbao* maker—in discussions, negotiations, and trials.

Let us rephrase some of what we have encountered so far. We observe how, around the new *Biaoqingbao*, a *community of knowledge* is formed in which different levels of knowledge define the relationships between members. The *Biaoqingbao* maker is the instructor, so to speak, and within the community of followers, definite differences could be noted between more and less experienced commentators. Newcomers in the rapidly expanding community had to submit to processes of

[5] Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/u/1989529421?refer_flag=1001030103_&is_all=1 on November 9, 2016.

Fig. 14.1 "Posh" Biaoqing

learning from scratch or acquire a place as a competent member by displaying relevant experience with similar signs and practices. *Rules were made, learned, deployed, and modified* throughout the process of community formation and consolidation. And an online practice that had no previous history of usage quickly became a normatively ordered, mutually ratified and regulated mode of interaction. In addition, this process of normative ordering and mutual ratification enabled the display of a sophisticated, cultured, and educated persona in online interactions. The hierarchical internal structure of the learning community thus enabled new forms of outward identity work in confrontation with nonmembers.

A very large amount of energy is used in this process of formation and consolidation of an online learning community, and the magnitude of the efforts can be measured by the monetary donations offered by grateful followers to *Biaoqingbao* makers. Therefore, even if what we observe here is easy to dismiss as mere entertainment and innocent, just-for-fun interaction, elementary processes of social

ordering, identity formation, and group construction are being shown in the process. This process, let us note and emphasize, is a process of *action construction*—the joint construction of a specific genre of online social action—and the way in which the process develops is through a wide and layered variety of learning practices, of which individual and collective identities are an outcome. It should be noted that such identities are exclusively *online* identities: Selfies—and their construction, elaboration, and development—require the specific infrastructures of online social spaces.

The Care of the Selfie

The same goes for the phenomenon to which we now turn. One of the features offered on Chinese social media platforms is a livestreaming app called Yizhibo, and this function has become widely used for the development of new, informal forms of online economy. Goods and services are traded via online streaming platforms, and mobile money transfer (another function of the platforms we consider here) enables swift and safe transactions.[6] Li (2018) reported more than 200 livestreaming platforms, with an audience estimated, in 2016, to have reached 325 million—half of the Chinese online population.

One particular commodity has become widely popular on Yizhibo: female beauty. Women open online chat rooms where they entertain a male audience; income is generated by "gifts" that can be purchased through the app and sent in real time to the chat room host. Chat room apps offer a range of such gifts in various price categories, from a relatively cheap "kiss" to an extremely expensive "Ferrari" or "diamond." Before we move to consider some aspects of identity construction in such chat rooms, a more general observation has to be made with respect to the characterization of online interaction we provided earlier.

In Goffman's terms, much of what we observe in the way of online interaction would be *disembodied* communication (1966, p. 14), and scripted messages or memes, such as the ones we surveyed in the previous section, would be typical instances of such disembodied communication. Obviously, interaction through livestreaming is *not* disembodied, and there is even a copresence enabling the kind of give-and-take of visual clues in real time that Goffman described in such detail. In livestreaming events, we can speak of real encounters in the sense of Goffman (1961). There is a twist, however, and the twist is significant. Firstly, while we obviously observe embodied interactions here, the communicating body is technologically mediated, and the same goes for the aspect of copresence. The women in the chat rooms appear on a screen—usually that of a handheld device—and they are

[6] What follows is largely based on Kunming Li's (2018) PhD research (see also Li & Blommaert, 2017). Additional information was obtained from Lin Jie through her fieldwork, and we gratefully acknowledge her input.

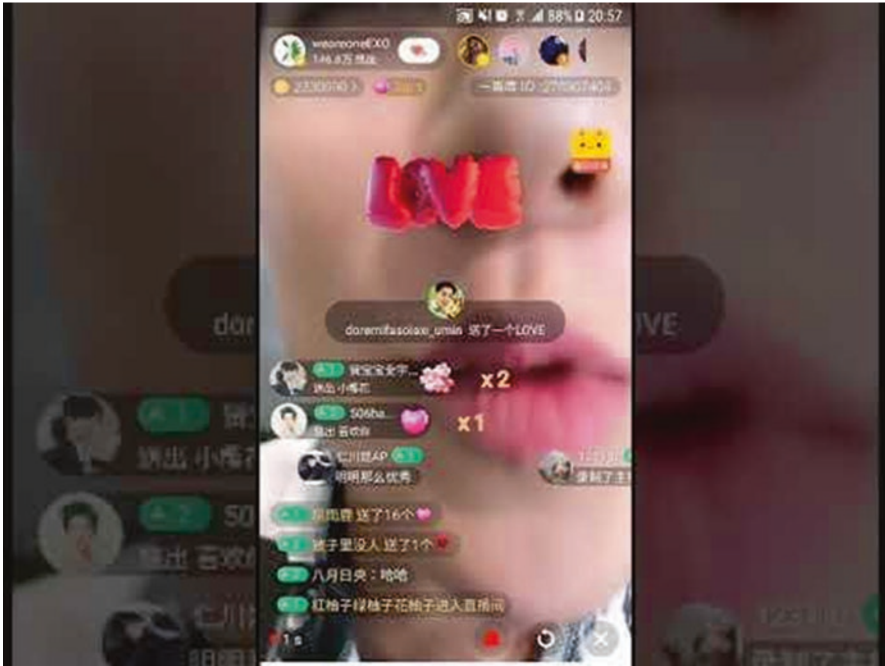

Fig. 14.2 Yizhibo Chat Room © YouTube 2017

usually visible only from the waist up. Their bodies are just a part of what is displayed on the screen, as we can see from Fig. 14.2. Next to the woman's face, icons and message balloons constantly appear, and they are crucial parts of the interaction.

The embodied interaction is thus scripted, edited, and curated, and it is multimodal and asymmetrical: While the woman can be heard by her audience members, they can only communicate with her by means of scripted messages, and while the woman is visible, her audience members remain invisible—their presence is attested through the messaging and the sending of gifts. The broad genre in these interactions can be described as flirting. The women show themselves; they move, talk, sing, and respond to messages and icons of their audience, expressing affection and gratitude. Thus, the woman in Fig. 14.2 kisses her webcam as a reward for a gift just received from one of her audience members. And it is here that we see a tremendous amount of interactionally organized collective identity work being performed.

The women do not come online unprepared. There are certain normative templates for expressing femininity, and Li (2018) elaborates on the template called *Baifumei*—a Chinese term composed of "White," "attractive," and "wealthy" and widely used to describe a particular ideal of feminine beauty. *Baifumei* are women with pale skin, an oval-shaped face, eyes somewhat bigger than average, and "Western" in looks and preferences. Such looks can be acquired by elaborate and detailed makeup schemes, using specific brands of creams, lipstick shades, eyeliner, and mascara and also by using electronic filters contained in the app for making the

eyes look somewhat bigger and for adjusting the outline of the woman's face. What audiences see in such chat rooms is clearly a Selfie—an electronically mediated and configured self-representation, necessitating great care whenever we refer to "embodiment" as a feature of these interactions.

Intricate behavioral scripts also need to be deployed and followed in interacting with the audiences. While a degree of vulgarity—expressed, for instance, in jokes, songs, or wordplay—is not discouraged, obscenity clearly is. Women can present themselves as erotic, but they should not, and do not, undress in front of the camera, and moves or utterances that are too overtly sexualized would also be discouraged. The point is to be *attractive* to the men with whom they interact, to show attention and affection to them, and to even express love to them—but all of this in ways that steer clear of associations with pornography and prostitution. The latter, of course, are criminal offences in China, and it is vital for the women to remain within the boundaries of what is politically, culturally, socially, and legally acceptable.

This is important for several reasons. One—the obvious one—is that no one searches for trouble with the law. But two other aspects are equally important. There is the economic aspect, enabling the women to earn considerable amounts of money (and to become financially independent that way), as long as their online performance satisfies the various normative expectations articulated and imposed by audiences, providers, and authorities. Then there is a social aspect to it as well: Women can be free to flirt with men online in ways that could be perceived as deviant or offensive in offline China and could have a range of undesired consequences. In other words, it is crucial that the women perform their flirtatious practices online *only*, as it keeps them safe and autonomous socially as well as economically. No wonder, then, that almost all the women operate under an "artist name"—what they do online has to be and remain exclusively online.[7]

Let us summarize what we have covered in this vignette. The self-presentation of women in Yizhibo chat rooms is governed by an elaborate "care of the Selfie" (a term obviously inspired by Foucault, 1986, 2003). This care of the Selfie consists of a very wide range of normatively ordered actions aimed at creating and performing an identity *exclusively designed for the online environment* in which it is played out. It is *proleptic* identity work, anticipating the criteria of one's audience and adjusting one's appearance accordingly prior to seeking the audience's uptake (Li, 2018). The actions consist of preparatory practices organizing the presentation of the body online, as well as of interactional practices aimed at successfully performing the identity for which men are ready to present gifts. All of them combined are very real forms of identity—critical identities that enable women to acquire an income and a degree of autonomy difficult to acquire elsewhere in society.

[7] Kunming Li (2018) observes that many of the women who run such chat rooms hail from remote and socioeconomically marginal areas in China. They very often lack the qualifications for upward mobility in the formal labor market, and their online economic activities are one way of compensating for such disadvantages. Note that successful women in this business can make millions and acquire the status of celebrity in online China.

Conclusions

Our two vignettes showed how *specific online actions generate specific online identities*. These identities bear similarities, naturally, with other known forms of identity, especially when we compare them with the "light" but socially important identities described by Goffman, Garfinkel, and others. At the same time, when we look at the details of identity construction in the cases discussed, the influence of the online technological infrastructure is compelling. We are facing modes of identity work here that are partly recognizable in terms of older, established categories of identity, such as those defined by gender, profession, and so forth, but which are at the same time entirely new in their loci and conditions for production.

The scale of such phenomena and the pace of their production, circulation, and change are tremendous, and this was one reason why we chose to illustrate our general points with examples from online China. Both the routine and ritualized exchange of *Biaoqingbao* and the Yizhibo chat rooms, where female beauty is played out for male audiences, are widespread phenomena involving hundreds of millions of individuals. In other words, these are not marginal phenomena; they are *structural* ones.

Addressing them, however, demands an action-oriented approach in which the specific forms of online social action are examined in a search for their "personnel," for the identities they allow, invite, enable, and ratify. An approach in which we start from what is known about offline life risks bypassing the crucial effects of the online infrastructures on what is possible in the way of social action. Consequently it risks overlooking the most important insight to be gathered from cases such as these: the fact that people have integrated online environments into their everyday social worlds and that they have become fully competent members of a changed society that way, doing and being different things than before and attaching great value to those things.

The Selfie is the identity effect of the interaction in scripted and technologically mediated environments, the affordances and restrictions of which play a crucial yet easily taken-for-granted role in determining what identities are performable, acceptable, and allowed therein. The two vignettes call attention to the role of technological mediation and configuration in the construction of the Selfie and to the action-centered approach to the study of the Selfie. This contribution invites a reimagination of identity work and a rethinking of methodologies of sociocultural studies in the era of digitalization.

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