



Managing image: The self-praise of celebrities on social media

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ABSTRACT

Studies on self-praise have focused on ordinary people's self-praise strategies both in oral communication and on social media. However, little research has examined how celebrities perform such speech acts. This study investigates the pragmatic strategies used in the self-praise of Chinese celebrities on social media microblogs. A dataset of 300 microblogs containing self-praise was collected from 10 Chinese celebrities (5 men and 5 women) on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo. This study analyses the types of self-praise strategies and the percentage of each strategy employed by the celebrities on Weibo. The results indicated that three main categories of self-praise strategies were employed, namely, modified explicit self-praise, implicit self-praise and explicit self-praise without modification, in decreasing order of frequency. In addition, the study explicates the factors underlying Chinese celebrities' use of self-praise strategies to maintain a positive image. This study adds to the under-investigated areas of celebrities' self-praise in online contexts and celebrities' image management. Implications for politeness research in Chinese are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Given the pervasiveness of social media in contemporary life, people, especially celebrities, are paying increasing attention to their social images and strategic self-presentation online. For celebrities, broadcasting messages to fans and/or other audiences on social media is not only a form of interaction but also a mode of self-presentation and image management (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995). Amongst the various forms of self-presentation used by celebrities, self-praise, which is a positive statement about oneself with the goal of constructing a favourable self-image (Bulter et al., 1995; Tice, 1995), is employed to a large degree (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Unlike ordinary people, celebrities employ various self-praise strategies to further transform their digital fame into commercial value, manifested as self-brands and eventually businesses (Abidin, 2018). However, to date, studies on self-praise have predominantly focused on ordinary people (Dayter, 2014; Kim, 2017; Speer, 2012; Underwood, 2011; Wu, 2011, 2012). Few linguistic studies have investigated celebrities' self-praise.

Previous studies on celebrity discourse have examined celebrities' rapport management with fans on social media, the commercial manifestation of celebrities' reputation and celebrity practices

for retaining fans or constructing an identity (e.g., Abidin, 2018; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012; Page, 2012a, b; Teng et al., 2020; Valentinsson, 2018; Wu and Lin, 2017; Zappavigna, 2014; Zhang and Wu, 2018). Although several studies have examined the speech acts (or relational acts, in their terminology) on celebrities' microblogs (e.g., Wu and Lin, 2017; Zhang and Wu, 2018), little research has explored celebrities' self-praise per se on social media. Furthermore, in the Chinese context, modesty has long been considered one of the core values of Chinese culture and to a great degree guides Chinese communication behaviour (Gu, 1990; Wu, 2011). Self-praise may involve great risks for Chinese individuals. Therefore, it is useful to investigate the self-praise posted by Chinese celebrities on social media. As Weibo is a very popular social media platform in China and many Chinese celebrities frequently update their statuses and post messages on Weibo, this study focuses on Chinese celebrities' self-praise posted on Weibo to examine the pragmatic strategies and the underlying factors of their self-praise.

2. Theoretical perspective: Celebrity self-praise as speech acts

2.1. Celebrity discourse

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of investigations in pragmatics and discourse studies on celebrities' rapport management with followers on social media (Valentinsson, 2018; Wu and Lin, 2017; Zhang and Wu, 2018). For example, focusing

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on a particular celebrity, [Valentinsson \(2018\)](#) examined the linguistic stance-taking strategies employed by Lady Gaga to construct an authentic-seeming public persona. It was found that Lady Gaga employs pragmatic strategies such as references to intimate relationships, inclusive plural pronouns and attention to fans to construct her relationship with fans. In an online context, social media plays a key role in relationship management ([Matley, 2018a](#)), especially for relationships between celebrities and their fans or followers. Social media platforms such as Twitter or Weibo suggest the possibility of polite interactions between celebrities and their fans ([Marwick and boyd, 2011](#)), which is a positive way for celebrities to do relational work ([Locher and Watts, 2005](#)), i.e., to negotiate their relationships, with their fans.

Moreover, several studies have explored the speech acts or relational acts used by celebrities in their online microblogs to manage their rapport with their followers or fans (e.g., [Wu and Lin, 2017](#); [Zhang and Wu, 2018](#)). [Wu and Lin \(2017\)](#) identified the different relational acts performed by six Chinese celebrity figures to construct their social identities and interact with followers on Weibo. The results indicated that the relational act of 'sharing information' was the most frequently employed. [Zhang and Wu \(2018\)](#) compared the speech acts used by Chinese celebrities on Weibo to discursively construct their personal and interpersonal identities with their followers with those used by American celebrities on Twitter. They found that in both the Chinese and American contexts, the speech acts of 'self-reporting moment and information' and 'promoting self and others' occurred with the greatest frequency.

The existing literature has also investigated the relationship between the reputation of celebrities and commercial value ([Abidin, 2018](#); [Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012](#); [Teng et al., 2020](#)). For example, [Teng et al. \(2020\)](#) found that the credibility, image and fame of celebrities to some degree affect the attitudes of their fans towards their endorsements. Thus, celebrities engage in positive self-presentation to maintain their images. This finding echoes [Abidin's \(2018\)](#) observation that internet celebrities ultimately transform their digital fame into commercial value based on the continuous accumulation of desired identities via positive self-presentational strategies.

Other themes explored in celebrities' discourse include the affiliative techniques of digital intimacy management ([Senft, 2008](#)), celebrity practices for maintaining fans and social status ([Marwick and boyd, 2011](#); [Tiago et al., 2016](#)), the basic norms and practices of celebrity talk shows ([Loeb, 2015](#)), the use of hashtags on Twitter as a self-branding technique by celebrities to promote visibility ([Page, 2012a](#)), the narratives of American celebrities on Twitter ([Page, 2012b](#)) and identity construction through celebrity discourse on microblogs ([Zappavigna, 2014](#)).

In summary, existing studies have investigated the uniqueness of celebrity discourse due to the publicity and fame of celebrities. The findings have demonstrated that celebrities focus on impression management in order to maintain and enhance their positive social image and ultimately obtain more social and economic capital.

2.2. Impression management on social media

[Goffman \(1959\)](#) described impression management as an interpersonal attempt to achieve personal and social goals through identity construction. Following Goffman, [Locher and Watts \(2005\)](#) argued that the negotiation of face by participants is involved in any interpersonal interaction and is the central concept of relational work. According to [Locher \(2004\)](#), relational work, which comprises the entire continuum of verbal behaviour, from direct, impolite, rude or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction, is employed as a useful concept to investigate the discursive struggle over politeness. Thus, impolite behaviour is just as

significant in defining relationships as appropriate/politic or polite behaviour. Human beings have a pervasive and ongoing concern regarding their public social images, and concerns about others' impressions limit what people are willing to do ([Leary, 1995](#); [Leary and Kowalski, 1990](#)). In this study, we use both image management and impression management. The two terms are used relatively interchangeably, with the former emphasizing celebrities' general ultimate goal and the latter being used more generally by the masses and highlighting the local process of such management efforts.

In addition to face-to-face interactions, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Weibo, are considered to provide users with endless opportunities to engage in online impression management. In recent years, online impression management has received vast scholarly attention, with studies targeting job applicants or employers' impression management on social media ([Lee et al., 2019](#); [Raban et al., 2016](#); [Roulin and Levashina, 2016](#)), the impact of a particular culture on online impression management ([DeAndrea et al., 2010](#); [Pearce, 2015](#); [Zhao et al., 2008](#)), social presence and impression management in online communities ([Eveline et al., 2015](#); [Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk Moffo, 2019](#)), the effect of social partners' evaluations on individuals' online identity construction ([Walther et al., 2008](#)), and pragmatic strategies for identity construction on social media ([Back et al., 2010](#); [Bazarova et al., 2012](#); [Toback, 2019](#)).

In summary, although previous studies have demonstrated the significance of online identity construction for individuals, most research subjects are ordinary people. Research on celebrities' impression management on social media is scarce (except for [Wu and Lin, 2017](#); [Zhang and Wu, 2018](#)), particularly in the Chinese online context. In addition, the existing studies are most often confined to the influence of specific cultures or social partners on impression management and identity construction. However, how people, let alone celebrities, enhance self-image and manipulate impression management through online self-praise is much less researched.

2.3. Self-praise and politeness

Several studies examining self-praise from the perspective of conversation analysis have focused on particular cultural groups ([Kim, 2017](#); [Speer, 2012](#); [Underwood, 2011](#); [Wu, 2011, 2012](#)). For example, [Underwood \(2011\)](#) examined facework, which was conceived as the pursuit of self-heroization, in the interactions of three elderly Irish friends. [Speer \(2012\)](#) documented that individuals preferred to employ a third party's attribution as a self-description rather than direct self-praise to make the content of self-praise more objective. Similarly, analysing phone communication in the Korean community, [Kim \(2017\)](#) found that the praiseworthy achievements of one's children were brought up by the co-participants to avoid the dilemma of being either too explicit or too implicit in self-praise.

In addition to examining oral interactions, the previous literature has examined computer-mediated communication (CMC). For example, [Dayter \(2014, 2016\)](#) investigated the pragmatic strategies of self-praise deployed in ballet students' tweets: self-praise plus disclaimer, self-praise plus shift of focus, self-praise plus self-denigration, self-praise plus reference to hard work and implicit self-praise by framing self-praise as a third-party complaint. [Matley \(2018b\)](#) examined the pragmatic functions of the affordance of hashtagging and multimodality in self-praise and positive self-presentation in Instagram posts. He argued that Instagram users employ hashtags as part of a strategy for negotiating an appropriate level of self-praise.

To date, only [Wu \(2011, 2012\)](#) has investigated the self-praising behaviours of Chinese speakers. Based on her analysis, [Wu \(2011\)](#)

proposed that Chinese speakers are willing to praise themselves and their close family members in specific situations. In addition, Wu (2012) investigated how Chinese speakers employed the strategies 'reporting a third party's words' and 'just the facts' in discussing past events to implicitly praise themselves.

As previous studies indicate, people often modify their self-praise or implicitly praise themselves during interactions. This preference reflects self-presentation norms in impression management, such as modesty (Leary, 1995). Modesty is one of the key maxims of Leech's (1983) politeness theories, which consist of "(a) Minimize praise of self; (b) Maximize dispraise of self" (Leech, 1983). For Chinese culture in particular, Gu (1990: 246) proposes the self-denigration maxim "(a) denigrate self and (b) elevate others". Pan and Kádár (2011) argue that some basic rules of politeness, such as modesty and discursive tools that maintain distinctions in social status, are still used in contemporary daily interactions in China. That is, despite the changes in modern China, the modesty maxim that is manifested in the elimination of self-praise and the augmentation of self-denigration is still appropriate.

Hence, self-praise challenges traditional Chinese politeness norms, specifically, modesty (Leech, 1983) and self-denigration (Gu, 1990). In contrast, celebrities often need to promote themselves to attract more attention (Abidin, 2018; Page, 2012a; Teng et al., 2020), and they therefore pay special attention to building affiliation and solidarity through politeness with fans (Wu and Lin, 2017). Investigating self-praise posted by celebrities on social media will shed light on celebrity discourse and impression management and provide insights for politeness research, particularly in online contexts. However, little research has concentrated on the self-praise of celebrities on social networks. Therefore, this study attempts to analyse self-praising speech acts on Weibo to further identify celebrities' strategies of self-praise in the under-researched Chinese online context. The research questions of the study are as follows:

- 1: 1: What pragmatic strategies of self-praise are employed by Chinese celebrities on Weibo?
- 2: 2: What underlying factors influence Chinese celebrities' use of self-praise on Weibo?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

As a mainstream social media platform in China, Weibo had 486 million active monthly users in June 2019 (see the official data at sohu.com/a/335917861_636458). In addition to the traditional celebrities in sports, entertainment, arts, and business, there are internet celebrities with a considerable number of fans on social media (Abidin, 2018; Page, 2012a; Teng et al., 2020); thus, it is difficult to define celebrities on social media in the traditional manner. In addition, because it is sometimes difficult to speculate about or judge a user's true intention based on word-limited blog posts, conjecturing whether the posts of others include self-praise involves a high amount of researcher subjectivity. These issues make collecting data on celebrity self-praise on Weibo a considerable challenge.

Weibo provides a search function to access public posts, which allows users to freely search for the information they want. In the days of Web 2.0, the use of social media gradually becomes more mainstream among bona fide celebrities (Abidin, 2018). The ability of attracting attention and fans on social media is highly valued and people with high number of followers can be considered as celebrities on Twitter (Marwick, 2013). That is, the number of fans of bloggers can to some degree represent the publicity of celebrities. Therefore, to collect comparatively representative and suit-

able data for this study, we decided to focus on bloggers with over 30 million fans who were considered celebrities on Weibo. We then randomly selected five male and five female celebrities, of whom eight are actors (four for each gender) and two are hosts (one for each gender). At the time of data collection, eight of the selected celebrities were in their early 30s, and two male celebrities were in their early 40s. Drawing on Dayter (2014), self-praise in this paper is operationalized as a speech act through which interlocutors positively present their appearance, possessions, skills, titles, etc., explicitly or implicitly, online. We collected the 30 most recent microblogs containing self-praise from each celebrity. Consequently, 300 blogs pertinent to self-praise were collected.

3.2. Data analysis

Since this study intends to shed light on a previously under-researched phenomenon, it is important to avoid imposing a pre-defined, inappropriate taxonomy. Therefore, the 300 Weibo blogs were coded with the help of NVivo (version 12) under the framework of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The data were analysed as follows. Because the present study aimed to explicate the self-praise strategies of the celebrity microblogs collected, we first read all the microblogs and coded the self-praise strategies according to their content. During the process of coding the data, some blogs were found to contain more than one self-praise strategy. In such cases, each independent strategy was coded separately. Consequently, 316 self-praise strategies were identified in the 300 microblogs. Second, after all the microblogs were coded, the self-praise strategies with similar functions were then grouped under the same category, based on relevant investigations: explicit self-praise without modification (Dayter, 2014), modified self-praise (Dayter, 2014) and implicit self-praise (Tobback, 2019). During the coding process in this study, the strategies that emerged were the result of long deliberation and several rounds of modification to better adapt them to the data collected. The first author coded all the data, and the coding was checked by the second author. The interrater reliability was 96.84%. Problematic cases were discussed, and agreement was reached after discussion.

Another two issues need to be noted. First, the microblogs were left unmodified in terms of typography to preserve how they appeared online. Second, to maintain anonymity, all the names of or references to users were removed.

4. Findings

This section presents the analysis of the self-praise strategies. As explained in the previous section, a number of self-praise strategies were coded and further grouped into three major categories:

- (a) explicit self-praise without modification: the use of direct words of praise supplemented by hashtags, hyperlinks or other multimedia means of self-presentation, such as photos or videos (Dayter, 2014);
- (b) modified explicit self-praise: praising oneself via various strategies to modify the degree of the illocutionary force of praising;
- (c) and implicit self-praise: an indirect speech act that requires the audience to guess the speaker's real intention of self-praise.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the frequency and percentage of the self-praise strategies.

As shown in Table 1, modified explicit self-praise included 'praise from a third party', 'change of praise focus', 'comparison

Table 1
Frequency and percentage of self-praise strategies.

Self-praise strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Explicit self-praise without modification	29	9.18
Modified explicit self-praise	156	49.37
Change of praise focus	87	27.53
Praise from a third party	56	17.72
Comparison of oneself between past and present	12	3.80
Comparison of oneself and others	1	0.32
Implicit self-praise	131	41.45
Self-praise as sharing	113	35.76
Self-praise as a question	16	5.06
Self-praise as denigration	2	0.63
Total	316	100

of oneself between present and past', and 'comparison of oneself and others'. Implicit self-praise consisted of 'self-praise as a question', 'self-praise as sharing' and 'self-praise as self-denigration'. Modified explicit self-praise, with its various subcategories, accounted for 49.37% of all instances of self-praise, representing the highest percentage, followed by implicit self-praise (41.45%); explicit self-praise without modification (9.18%) was the least frequently used. We will now analyse each self-praise strategy in the following sub-sections.

4.1. Modified explicit self-praise

Modified explicit self-praise is in this study defined as praising oneself via various strategies to modify the degree of the illocutionary force of praising. As indicated in Table 1, celebrities employ diverse modified strategies to self-praise on Weibo. The following subsections deeply analyse the individual self-praise strategies in order of decreasing frequency.

4.1.1. Change of praise focus

In this study, the change of praise focus as a strategy to mitigate the degree of self-praise refers to crediting anything or anybody that is relevant to the speaker for indirect positive self-presentation. This strategy is similar to the strategy of assigning credit for the accomplishment to someone else in compliment responses (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988). Instead of directly promoting the positive self-image of the speaker, shifting the praise focus to a person or a thing that is relevant to the blogger is safer because it appears to praise others at the surface level, which to some degree lowers the threat to the interlocutor's positive face. Through this strategy, the speaker constructs a positive self-image of him/herself by changing the focus to a relevant subject or person.

Fig. 1 shows the frequency of different themes in posts by Chinese celebrities on Weibo employing the 'change in praise focus' strategy.

Since celebrities often participate in various TV programmes and serve as brand endorsers, it is common for them to praise their TV programmes or the endorsement products. Thus, the frequency of these two themes is higher than the frequency of the other themes, appearing 41 times and 21 times, respectively. The following two examples showcase the use of the two themes.

- (1) #嗨唱转起来# 天团<娜么吉祥>今晚又要震撼来袭, 保证又是各种惊喜, 而且笑得根本停不下来的~一期, 我都等不及啦, 8点10分, 继续一起嗨起来。(加节目的照片)

¹ The name of the group in Chinese uses the character of the blogger's given name, which cannot be shown in an English translation.

#Hi, Sing and Turn# The superstar group "So lucky"¹ is going to rock again tonight. It is guaranteed to be another surprising and amusing episode that you can't stop laughing at. I can't wait. At 8:10, let's continue to cheer up together. (Photos of the TV programme were also posted.)

- (2) 细腻剔透樱花肌, 来自最近的新宠#樱花微精华#@雅诗兰黛, 让我无惧高清镜头与熬夜拍摄。(加作者手拿产品的照片)

Delicate skin like the cherry blossom comes from my latest favourite #Micro Essence #@ Estee Lauder, which makes me fearless of high-definition lenses and staying up late shooting. (Photos of the blogger holding the product in her hand were also posted.)

In example (1), the blogger praises her TV programme with the aim of advertising it, not only assuring the potential audience of the splendid effects but also praising the work she invested and her achievements. Notably, the Chinese version of the advertised star group's name "娜么吉祥 *name jixiang* (So lucky)" includes the blogger's given name '娜 *na*', which is used as a homophone of '那 *na*' to replace the latter character in the word "那么 *name* (lit. that; so)". She calls the group "天团 *tiantuan* (superstar group)", in which she happens to be the leading performer. Therefore, the host is praising the splendid content of her TV programme and the performance of her group. In example (2), as an ambassador of the brand Estee Lauder, the blogger praises the product by advertising its magical effects: it can make skin look like a delicate cherry blossom. Furthermore, both the verbal message and the uploaded photos imply that the celebrity's skin is so delicate and cherry-blossom-like that she dares to face high-definition lenses and stay up late shooting.

- (3) 小猫妹妹人儿 (加作者女儿的照片)

My cat-like girl. (The post includes a photo of the blogger's daughter.)

- (4) #我要上春晚#之蒙古舞斗舞。让你们知道, 我在舞坛是有一定地位的。(加作者的照片)

#I'm going to the Spring Festival Gala#The Mongolian dance. I want you to know that I have a certain status in the dance field. (The post includes photos of the blogger.)

Examples (3) and (4) exemplify the other two themes of the change of praise focus strategy, that is, 'praise one's children' and 'shift to one's speciality'. Some married celebrities showcase their postnuptial life, for example, by commenting on the cuteness of their children and posting their photos (3). Sometimes celebrities also choose to praise some of their specialities as a mitigatory strategy to highlight their achievements. In example (4), the blogger was selected as a compere for the Spring Festival Gala, and her participation was much anticipated and received much attention from the masses and the media. Instead of showing off her achievement, the blogger joked about her speciality of dancing in a humorous way.

4.1.2. Praise from a third party

In this study, praise from a third party is defined as reporting a third party's praise of oneself as a mitigatory way to present self-praise (Wu, 2012). Part of the face-threatening nature of self-praise is taken away by employing such modified strategy (Toback, 2019). This strategy accounts for 17.72% of all instances of self-praise collected in the present study, indicating that it is employed quite frequently. By reporting the assessment of a third party, the speaker praises him/herself in a seemingly objective way. For example, in the instance below, the author says nothing

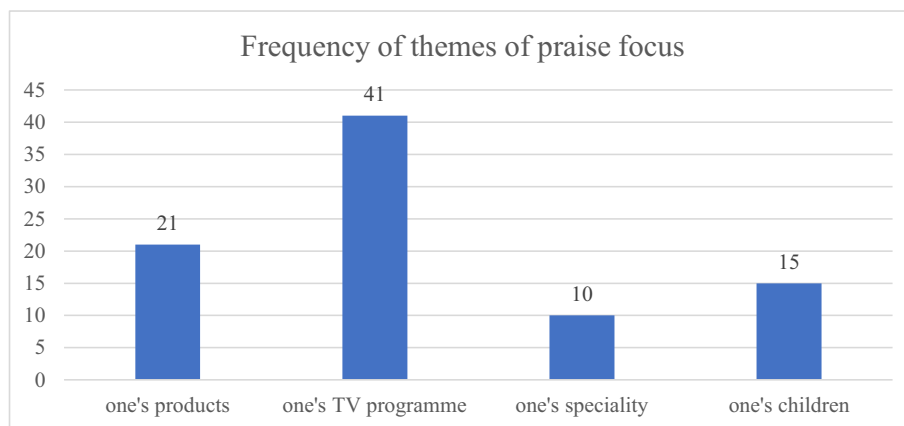


Fig. 1. Frequency of praise focus themes.

positive about himself directly but relates others' words, which increases the perceived objectiveness of the content.

(5) 我妈说, 这个胡桃夹子唱歌可真好听。(加作者唱歌的视频)

My mother said that this nutcracker really sings well. (A video of the blogger singing was also posted.)

In example (5), the affirmative descriptive adjectives are attributed to a third party, the blogger's mother, which allows the blogger to not only assert the authenticity of his singing ability but also praise himself in an indirect way.

4.1.3. Comparison of oneself between past and present

The strategic comparison of oneself between past and present is realized by comparing oneself in a previous state with oneself in the present state to show humility in the self-praise. In example (6), the author recently gave birth and gained weight during pregnancy and breastfeeding. She reinforced her determination to save her evenings for exercising to stay fit because she had to take care of the baby during the day. The comparison between her previous weight of 75 kg and her present weight of 50 kg reveals her determination and willpower to lose weight. By showing her hard life and difficult situation, the blogger's real intention of praising her own persistence and her glamorous physique was achieved.

(6) 150斤到100斤, 白天带娃娃, 晚上健身练腹肌, 我本来就很美。(加作者的照片)

From 75 kg to 50 kg (the blogger used *jin*, the Chinese measurement that equals 0.5 kg), I babysit my babies during the day and exercise my abdominal muscles at night. I am truly beautiful. (The post includes photos of the blogger.)

4.1.4. Comparison of oneself and others

In addition to comparing their past and present selves, celebrities sometimes compare themselves with others. This strategy is the least used in the explicit strategy with modification category, occurring only once in the present dataset. The following example explicates this strategy. In example (7), the name of the celebrity contains 'yang' (which has the same pronunciation as the word lamb in Chinese). He praises the cute lamb and his fans, saying that the lamb is as cute as himself, and his fans are cute as well. Therefore, in this sentence, on the surface level, it appears that the celebrity is praising the lamb and his fans, but he is also praising himself.

(7) 怎么有和我一样可爱的小羊, 还有一样可爱的你们。(加作者与羊和粉丝的照片)

How can there be lambs as cute as me, and people as cute as you. (The post includes photos of the blogger, lambs and his fans.)

4.2. Implicit self-praise

As shown in Table 1, the total number of implicit self-praise incidents is 131, which accounts for 41.45% of the total self-praise examples. Implicit self-praise is realized predominantly by the strategy implicit self-praise as sharing (113 instances, consisting of 86.26% of all implicit self-praise), whilst the other two strategies occurred only 16 and 2 times, respectively.

Implicit self-praise is considered an indirect speech act that requires the audience to guess the speaker's real intention (self-praise). As such, in this study, the strategies of implicit self-praise include the use of self-denigration or questions as well as implied or even seemingly irrelevant words plus remarkable photos of the blogger to avoid direct self-praise (i.e., framing self-praise as sharing). In these ways, self-praise is realized implicitly through speculation by the audience.

4.2.1. Self-praise as sharing

This type of implicit self-praise is realized by posting seemingly irrelevant words, emojis or photos, videos or other hyperlinks related to the blogger. Unlike modified explicit self-praise strategies, which convey the content of praise via words, in this strategy, the words and emojis do not point to the virtues of the blogger; instead, the author's intention of self-praise is revealed by the posted photos or videos or the content of the hyperlinks. For instance, in example (8), the blogger simply posted 'good afternoon', which indicates nothing personal about her. However, she posted a number of flattering photos of herself, indicating that the blogger wanted to show off her appearance. Under this strategy, the themes of the uploaded photos are usually related to the blogger's attractive personal appearance, enviable talents, etc., while the words or emojis are irrelevant to praise. Although the process of explicating the blogger's intention embedded in irrelevant words is complex, the praiseworthiness of the author can be inferred from the multimedia content.

(8) 下午好 (加作者的照片)

Good afternoon. (The post includes photos of the blogger.)

4.2.2. Self-praise as a question

The strategy 'self-praise as a question' involves using a question to bring the praiseworthy issue before the audience (Dayter, 2014) instead of engaging in explicit praise, as shown in example (9).

(9) 什么是好A²?(加作者的照片)

What is really A (cool)? (The post includes posts photos of the blogger.)

In the above example, at the surface level, the question mark begs an answer, but the photos posted by the blogger demonstrate that she was asking a rhetorical question. Therefore, the rhetorical question and the following photos clearly indicate that she was not seeking but was providing the answer: the blogger herself is the epitome of cool.

4.2.3. Self-praise as self-denigration

In addition to the above two subcategories, self-denigration can also be employed as an implicit strategy of self-praise. The strategy 'self-praise as denigration' in this study refers to a blog post with self-denigrating words but beautiful photos of the blogger, which shows the blogger's real intention of praising rather than denigrating herself or showing modesty. Essentially, like humblebragging (Matley, 2018b), which involves using false modesty to self-praise, self-praise as self-denigration also entails humility and insincerity (Wittels, 2012). For instance, in example (10), the celebrity posted photos of herself in which she actually looked very beautiful, but she wrote "ugliness is better for health". On the surface, it appears that she is admitting that she is ugly but healthy. However, the effect of self-praise is realized by the incongruity of the self-denigrating words and the positive visual content, attracting compliments from the audience while avoiding the risk of seeming to show off.

(10) 丑丑更健康 (加作者的照片)

Ugliness is better for health. (The post includes photos of the blogger.)

4.3. Explicit self-praise without modification

Following Dayter (2014), explicit self-praise without modification in this study refers to the use of direct words of praise supplemented by hashtags, hyperlinks or other multimedia means of self-presentation, such as photos or videos. The contexts in which this type of self-praise strategy are employed are rather limited due to the direct threat posed to the interlocutor's face and the risk of seeming to show off associated with this strategy. Generally, this strategy is used when it is highly likely that the audience will not be annoyed at the speaker, for example, among intimates, in in-group conversation, or among celebrities and their fans. Possibly because they are concerned about the acceptance of the public and not just their fans, celebrities do not frequently employ explicit self-praise without modification (it accounts for only 9.18% of all instances of self-praise).

As Ma et al. (2017) note, people are inclined to show the positive and brilliant aspects of themselves in public. Dayter (2014) also analyses that unmitigated self-praise in blogs usually consists of the blogger's small achievements and successes. In the present study, explicit self-praise without modification is confined to the praise of one's external appearance or internal abilities. With respect to the external aspects, the celebrities often praise their

own beautiful faces as a way to magnetize fans, whilst cooking skills, which represent a necessary part of life, and other strengths, such as writing and painting, are internal aspects. The following are examples of explicit self-praise without modification.

(11) 第一次到美丽研究院, 遇见美丽的自己。(加作者的照片)

The first time I went to the Beauty Institute, I met my beautiful self. (The post includes photos of the blogger.)

(12) 亲爱的们, 妻子的浪漫旅行开始啦, 第一站, 抓鸡抓鱼聊天吃火锅, 还有我教你做最好吃的大盘鸡。(加作者做饭的照片)

Dear friends, the wives' romantic trip has begun. During the first stop, we caught chickens and fish, chatted and ate hot pot, and I will teach you to make the most delicious Big Pan chicken. (Photos of the blogger cooking were also included.)

(13) 看了哪吒, 爆炸哭, 中国的动画片真棒!回来偷偷画了一张敖丙大人, 还不错哟, 请大家帮我上个色啊。(加作者画的图)

After watching *Ne Zha* (a Chinese cartoon movie), I cried very hard. Chinese cartoons are awesome! I came back and secretly drew a picture of Lord Ao Bing³. It was good. Please help me colour it. (A picture drawn by the blogger was also posted.)

In example (11), the phrase "beautiful self" was used as a positive textual statement to describe the blogger's appearance (an external aspect), whilst the photos interdiscursively refer to the "beautiful self". The blogger in example (12) introduced her daily life during her participation in a TV programme, along with simple words to describe herself as a teacher who can teach the audience to cook delicious dishes (an internal aspect). The phrase "It was good" in example (13) praised the blogger's drawing skills (an internal aspect), which have nothing to do with her occupation, thus adding to the audience's favour of her. Her request to help her colour the painting further created the chance for her fans to interact with her. The painting that she posted on Weibo not only enacts self-praise by exhibiting her competence but also enhances her relationship with her fans by disclosing her private interests and inviting her fans to interact with her (Marwick and Boyd, 2011).

5. Discussion

This study has investigated the self-praise strategies employed by Chinese celebrities on Weibo. As the results indicate, three major categories, viz., explicit self-praise without modification, modified explicit self-praise and implicit self-praise, are deployed, with each category including more specific strategies. As demonstrated by previous studies (e.g., Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Zhang and Wu, 2018), celebrities tend to present themselves actively in online contexts to interact with or maintain their fans. In the present investigation, it was found that when the celebrities praised themselves on Weibo, they predominantly chose modified explicit self-praise strategies (49.37%) and implicit self-praise strategies (41.45%). In contrast, they infrequently praised themselves straightforwardly in a direct way (only 9.18%).

In this study, modified explicit self-praise was employed most frequently. The popularity of this type of self-praise strategy may be due to two reasons. On the one hand, it is possible that modified explicit self-praise can prevent one from being regarded as bragging and may pose fewer threats to the blogger's and the audience's face than explicit self-praise without any modification

² The phrase "好(hao, lit. good) A" is a new internet meme adopted from the TV series "It started with a kiss" and was originally used to describe cool girls.

³ A handsome supporting character in the cartoon movie.

(Brown and Levinson, 1987). On the other hand, in the one-to-many and asynchronous communication context (Scott, 2015) on Weibo, modified explicit self-praise can abate the cognitive processing load required for the audience to decode the blog's implied meaning and to infer the blogger's real intention. According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2004), information processing should demand as little mental effort as possible to be relevant. Modified explicit self-praise, with its comparative explicitness, requires less cognitive processing than implicit self-praise. In the online context, bloggers have the option to make their utterances explicit or implicit (Scott, 2015). Moreover, when posting online, bloggers, especially celebrities, need to consider the inferential process of potential ambiguous audiences in undefined contexts (Wesch, 2009) and the degree of face-threat to audiences (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Thus, modified explicit self-praise is a safer choice for celebrities seeking to optimize the content of their blogs within a limited number of words.

Despite the difference in terms of specific frequency, both this study and Wu (2011) found that modified explicit self-praise was the preferred type of self-praise among the Chinese, whether celebrities on social media (as in this study) or ordinary people in face-to-face communication (as in Wu's study). The diverse types of mitigatory strategies used not only reflect Chinese celebrities' desire to practice successful impression management (Leary, 1995) online but also conform to traditional Chinese politeness (Leech, 1983; Wu, 2011). Among the various modifications employed, changing the praise focus was used with the highest frequency, manifested as 'praise one's TV programme', 'praise one's products', 'praise one's children' and 'praise one's speciality'. The first two subcategories, namely, 'praise one's TV programme' and 'praise one's products', are unique to celebrities. Rather than directly exposing the real intention of the speaker, shifting the praise focus is a sensible way to avoid threats to the hearer's face and further arouses sympathy in the audience. More specifically, when shifting the praise focus to a TV programme or their children, the celebrities intend to construct positive group identities (Page, 2019) and give a positive impression of being caring parents to the audience. The strategy of 'praise one's products' manifests the economic value of the celebrities, which may in turn attract more endorsements for them. The function of 'praise one's speciality' is to construct a positive identity (Goffman, 1959) and a good impression of the celebrity to attract new fans and interact with old fans. Praising through a third party seems to involve simply repeating the descriptions of others; however, it functions as self-praise, and the validity of the praising content is strengthened by being framed as another's evaluation. The high frequency of reporting third-party praise as self-praise conforms to the findings of previous literature (Speer, 2012; Tobback, 2019). The use of comparison as a strategy to mitigate self-praise varies from the comparison of one's former to one's present self to indicate lasting beauty or positive virtues, such as perseverance, to the comparison of oneself with others to not only praise others but also praise oneself through the comparison. Regardless of the subcategory of comparison employed, the bloggers' intention is to mitigate the explicit praise to reduce face threats to the audience and to construct desirable identities for themselves.

Concerning implicit self-praise strategies, the present study found a large number of examples that accounted for 41.45% of all self-praise instances. The illocutionary force of praising is most often realized via the combination of words and multimedia in a microblog post. Within this category, the strategy self-praise as sharing was frequently deployed by posting seemingly irrelevant words or emojis together with photos, videos or hyperlinks related to the blogger. Because celebrities are concerned with publicity, self-praise through sharing is safe for them. The praiseworthiness

of the blogger, usually in terms of appearance, is conveyed by the posted photos and other multimedia content instead of words or emojis. Framing self-praise as self-denigration or a question misleads or hides the actual praise intention, but after reconsidering the real function of the blog, the self-elevating act can be inferred from the question or the denigration. The Chinese, to some degree, tend not to express their true wishes in a direct way (Bond, 1991; Gu, 1990; Wu, 2011). The present study found that Chinese celebrities employ self-denigration as a strategy to frame self-praise. This finding demonstrates the influence of traditional culture on individuals' behaviour, even that of celebrities who need to promote themselves. Because threats to the audience's face are attenuated to the maximum extent and the embarrassment of praising oneself is avoided (Leech, 1983; Wu, 2011), the strategy of implicit self-praise is frequently employed by Chinese celebrities.

Because explicit self-praise without modification involves the straightforward praise of oneself, this strategy accounted for only 9.18% of the self-praise instances identified in this study. A focus on external aspects, such as appearance, and internal aspects, such as writing or drawing skills, is involved in such explicit self-praise. These focuses of praise are reasonable because appearance and competence are crucial for most celebrities. As exemplified in Section 4, self-praise without any mitigatory strategy may constitute a direct threat to the interlocutor's face (Herbert, 1990). Considering the publicity of the celebrities' microblogs, it is understandable that this type of strategy was not frequently employed in the present study. Indeed, this result echoes the argument of Leary and Kowalski (1990: 38) that "the more public one's behaviour, the more likely one is to be concerned with how it appears to others". It is worth noting that unlike ordinary users of Weibo, who are permitted to be anonymous, celebrities use their real names on the online network. Therefore, when celebrities post microblogs presenting self-praise, they need to take into account the potential face threats to different audiences (Scott, 2015), especially the public. However, the application of multimedia devices, such as hyperlinks, hashtags and photos, provides the celebrities opportunities to present themselves and to confide in their audience (Page, 2012b). Considering their publicity, the importance of managing their accounts and the face threats to a large audience, celebrities seldom engage in explicit self-praise without modification. This may, for the most part, explain the low frequency of self-praise without any modification in Chinese celebrities' Weibo posts.

Despite the potential risk of violating traditional Chinese values, the modesty maxim and the self-denigration maxim (Gu, 1990) in particular, self-praise abounds in Chinese celebrities' Weibo posts. A number of underlying factors may influence Chinese celebrities' use of self-praise strategies on Weibo. First, people engage in self-presentation as a means of constructing their public identities and making the desired impression (Leary, 1995; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Celebrities who are public figures employ self-praise as a positive mode of self-presentation and impression management, their audience being ordinary individuals.

In Web 2.0, social media is necessary for celebrities to create and maintain a fan base (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Appropriate self-praise in microblogs is frequently employed by celebrities as an important means of constructing a positive image (Zhang and Wu, 2018). On the one hand, appropriate self-praise on social media is a convenient way for celebrities to interact with and retain their fans. On the other hand, the use of appropriate self-praise to increase their visibility to the masses helps celebrities attract new fans. Indeed, fans interact among themselves and new fans may become old fans eventually. With an increasing number of fans, celebrities can expand their social and economic capital. As previous studies have observed (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012; Page, 2012a; Teng et al., 2020), celebrities need certain

positive exposure to maintain and promote their commercial value and positive image. Through self-praise, celebrities' ultimate goal in image management is to obtain more social and economic value. Therefore, Chinese celebrities frequently and strategically post self-praise messages on social media. Indeed, they have to be cautious with their use of different self-praise strategies because inappropriate self-praise would be counterproductive. Overwhelming self-praise content may not only arouse detestation among the public but could also lead to the loss of potential and existing fans, which would likely cause the loss of social and economic capital.

In addition, with the advent of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese people, particularly young people, are influenced by Western cultural values (Ren and Woodfield, 2016). Globalization has influenced the pragmatic practices of the Chinese in a number of respects; for example, currently, the Chinese tend to accept compliments rather than reject them (Chen and Yang, 2010). Because self-praise, like compliments, belongs to the pragmatic space of evaluative acts of flattering, praise, admiration, recommendation, accolade and words of appreciation (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000), it is highly likely that self-praise is free of the pressure to be acceptable and may even become a local group ritual (Kádár, 2017) for young Chinese netizens, who are the main target of celebrities' image management on social media.

Finally, the pervasiveness of self-praise on contemporary social media can be explained by the theoretical framework of self-politeness proposed by Chen (2001). That is, a speaker's linguistic behaviour and pragmatic practice is affected by his/her need to protect and enhance his/her own face as much as it is by the need to protect and enhance the hearer's face. Under this self-oriented theory, self-praise in the Chinese online community can be seen as enhancing and protecting the speaker's own face. As a large number of Weibo users are young people who were born in the late 1980s or later, the encouragement of competition may prompt them to express themselves more freely (Ren and Woodfield, 2016) and to place more emphasis on themselves.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the pragmatic strategies employed by Chinese celebrities in self-praise on Weibo. Three major types of self-praise strategies were observed, namely, explicit self-praise without modification, modified explicit self-praise, and implicit self-praise, each of which contained a number of specific sub-strategies. Since little research has been conducted to explore Chinese self-praise strategies in online contexts, the present study contributes to the existing literature on self-praise. In addition, celebrities are under-represented in self-praise studies and in pragmatic studies more generally. The present study can thus shed light on the similarities and differences between self-praise by ordinary people and self-praise by celebrities. Finally, as self-praise is an important aspect of self-presentation, particularly for celebrities' image management, this study also provided illuminating insights for self-presentation and impression management research.

However, the study focused only on Chinese celebrities on Weibo. The findings in the present study may not be generalizable to other contexts of self-praise or even to the same context in the future because digital genres and cultural backgrounds vary across time and culture. Future researchers may want to expand the scope to examine self-praise in different languages and celebrities in other cultures. Moreover, although the study randomly collected data of half male and half female to balance the gender issue, future studies may want to investigate whether gender influences the pragmatic strategies of celebrities' self-praise on social media. Finally, the present study analysed self-praise from the research-

er's perspective. It is necessary to address the fact that celebrities' blogs may not be authored by the celebrities personally and may be the result of collective authorship by their marketing teams (Page, 2012b). Further studies may also want to examine the data from the producer's emic perspective using interviews or verbal reports (Ren, 2014) to provide more comprehensive insights for investigating both the production and the perception of self-praise.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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