

# Self-Praise on Chinese Social Network Sites

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The self-praise involves disclosing positive things about oneself, which can be seen as self-promoting behavior. The phenomenon of self-praise has attracted a wide range of scholarly interest in the field of pragmatics in recent years. However, current studies are predominately focused on self-praising behavior on some traditional social media platforms, such as Weibo, Twitter, and so forth. Some newly-born social media platforms are to a large extent under-represented. As such, the study interrogates the pragmatic strategies of self-praise on Chinese social networking sites, in a qualitative and quantitative analysis of 300 user-generated posts on Xiaohongshu, one of the most popular social media platforms in China.

*Keywords:* self-praise, social media platform, Xiaohongshu, posts

## Introduction

People always think highly of their social image and strategic self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Self-praise, as one type of self-presentation, involves disclosing positive statements about oneself to construct a favorable self-image (Bulter, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). The phenomenon of self-praise in the online context violates classic politeness theories, such as the modesty maxim in Leech's (1983) politeness theory and the self-denigration maxim proposed by Gu (1990). What's more, self-praise threatens the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) given the overt compliment paid to the speaker. In recent years, the popularity of self-praise in the online context has attracted a wide range of scholarly interest. For instance, Mattley (2018) explored the pragmatic function of the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag on Instagram. Tobback (2019) surveyed the self-praise of professional's LinkedIn profiles. Ren and Guo (2020) investigated the self-praise strategies employed by ordinary people and celebrities on Weibo. The research results of previous studies point toward the anonymity of social media which leads to the pervasiveness of self-praise in the online context. Nevertheless, current studies overlook the self-praise on some newly-born social networking sites, such as Xiaohongshu, which is one of the most influential Chinese social network sites. Therefore, the present study interrogated self-praise on Chinese newly-born social network sites, an under-investigated area.

## Previous Studies on Self-Praise

Self-presentation is unavoidable in interpersonal relationship (Goffman, 1959). The process of

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self-presentation is influenced by many factors, such as the relationship between the speaker and the audience, social norms, and the motivation of the speaker. As a typical self-presentation, self-praise occurs frequently on social media (Ren & Guo, 2020). Drawing on Ren and Guo (2020), this study defines self-praise as a speech act through which interlocutors disclose positive things about themselves.

Recent years have seen various studies exploring self-praise on social media. For example, Dayter (2014) investigated the pragmatic strategies of self-praise in an online ballet community. This study reveals multifarious strategies by ballet students including self-praise plus disclaimer, self-praise plus shift of focus, self-praise plus self-denigration, and self-praise plus reference to hard work. Tobback (2019) analyzed the way that French and US professionals present themselves on LinkedIn. There are also some researchers centering on self-praise strategies employed by ordinary people (Ren & Guo, 2020) and celebrities (Guo & Ren, 2020) on Chinese social media platforms. However, their scholarly interest mainly focuses on Weibo whereas ignores some newly-born Chinese social network sites, such as Xiaohongshu, Tik Tock, WeChat, and so forth. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the self-praise strategies adopted by Chinese netizens and why different strategies are employed drawing on a dataset of 300 authentic posts collected from Xiaohongshu.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The present study decided to focus on data collected from Xiaohongshu, which is one of the most popular media for computer-mediated communication (CMC) in China. With its considerable number of users, Xiaohongshu is dubbed as the “Chinese Instagram”. According to official data on the Xiaohongshu website, the number of active monthly users is more than 200 million. Most of the CMC platforms require the users to register with real information whereas the users of Xiaohongshu can register with their real name or nickname and freely manage their profile.

Users can search for the information they need via the search function provided by Xiaohongshu. We search for the keyword “自夸” (self-praise) in the search interface of Xiaohongshu (30 days) to ensure the data are relevant with self-praise and representative. Then we collect the Top 10 blogs related to self-praise each day. As such, we collected 300 posts relevant to self-praise by different users and served as the basis for further analysis.

### Data Analysis

We code the 300 posts with the help of NVivo (Version 12). First, we read through all the posts and coded the self-praise strategies based on their content. For posts containing more than one strategy, we coded each independent strategy separately to ensure the accuracy of the study. Then, we categorized the self-praise strategies with similar functions into the same category based on the classification proposed by Ren and Guo (2020): implicit self-praise, modified self-praise, and explicit self-praise without modification. In total, we identified 309 self-praise strategies in the 300 posts.

## Results

In this part, by presenting the percentages and frequencies of separate strategies and qualitative analysis of representative posts, we examine the self-praise strategies in detail. Table 1 displays the percentage and frequency of each type of strategy.

Table 1

*Frequency and Percentage of Self-Praise Strategies.*

Self-praise strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Explicit self-praise without modification	132	42.7
Modified explicit self-praise	108	35
Praise from a third party	41	13.3
Change of praise focus	36	11.7
Disclaimer	22	7.1
Reference to hard work	9	2.9
Implicit self-praise	69	22.3
Self-praise as sharing	33	10.7
Self-praise as a complaint	24	7.8
Self-praise as denigration	12	3.9
Total	309	100

**Explicit Self-Praise Without Modification**

Drawing on Dayter (2014), explicit self-praise without modification refers to direct praising utterances using positive evaluative words supplemented by multimedia means of self-presentation, such as photos or videos. By using this type of self-praise strategy, the blogger consciously or unconsciously conveys a message that the blogger is better than the audience, thus threatening the audience's positive face.

Example 1: 今天的刘海太好看了请允许我自夸一下! (附图作者本人自拍)

My bangs are so pretty today! Please allow me to praise myself! (The post is followed by the blogger's selfie)

The direct descriptive word "pretty" in Example 1, along with the blogger's selfie, conveys a message that the blogger is beautiful. A good selfie is a positive form of self-presentation, and a beautiful selfie posted online represents a blogger's ideal self. The face in the selfies posted in the example wears delicate makeup to depict the bloggers' ideal selves. In the above-mentioned case, the blogger praises herself through words and pictures without any modification.

**Modified Explicit Self-Praise**

**Disclaimer.** When employing the strategy of disclaimer to praise themselves, bloggers usually add a trigger, such as "I am not bragging" to deny the fact that they are praising themselves.

Example 2: 不是我自夸, 我家的蜂蜜真他娘的好吃! (附图作者自制蜂蜜照片)

I'm not praising myself, but my homemade honey is so delicious! (The post is followed by the picture of the blogger's homemade honey)

With the help of the disclaimer "I'm not praising myself", the blogger pretends to be modest to disaffirm that she is boasting. However, the latter sentence "my homemade honey is so delicious!" represents his real intention—That is to advertise his homemade honey and attract customers.

**Praise from a third party.** "Praise from a third party" means praising oneself by quoting a third party's evaluations. It was the most frequently employed strategy in modified self-praise, standing for 13.3% of all self-praise strategies. This strategy is popular since the evaluation from the third party can validate the

blogger's merits more objectively.

Example 3: 经常被别人夸鼻子好看，同学还有觉得我整过鼻子的，现在我觉得它好特别。（附图作者自拍）

People around me always say that my nose is pretty. My classmates even think that I have done plastic surgery. Now, I realize that my nose is so unique. (The post is followed by the blogger's selfie)

As shown in Example 3, the blogger quotes other people's judgment of her nose to praise herself explicitly while increasing the credibility as well as the objectivity of her post. This strategy is smart in that the blogger does not totally agree with or deny the assessment of others. So, if challenged, she can simply reply that she was quoting the evaluation of others.

**Change of praise focus.** This type of strategy refers to extolling the merits of a person or thing associated to indicate the advantage of the poster. It's frequently used in modified self-praise, representing 11.7% of all self-praise strategies. The strategy is prevalent in our lives, for example, parents praise children, teachers praise students, and so on. It is safer to shift the focus of praise from yourself to others than to praise oneself directly.

Example 4: 跟我补习英语两个月，邻居家的孩子高考英语成功考上了120，太棒啦！

After two months of studying English with me, my neighbor's child got 120 marks in the college entrance examination. So great!

Superficially, the blogger in Example 4 praises her students since the student achieved great achievement under her guidance. As a matter of fact, her real intention is to convey the information that she is a good teacher. This kind of self-praise is far more mitigatory than to praise oneself directly.

**Reference to hard work.** Through displaying hard work, the blogger describes how much effort he has made to accomplish his goal. In this way, the bloggers avoid damaging the audience's positive face.

Example 5: 前后三个多月，真是太累太痛苦了！终于写完毕业论文了！！（附图作者论文封面照片）

I've spent three months on my final thesis! So exhausted! So painful! (The post is followed by the cover of the blogger's paper)

In Example 5, the blogger uses adjectives, such as "exhausted", "painful" to depict his endurance and diligence in the paper-writing process. He also attached a picture of his paper to showcase that he's finally gone over this tough job. Similar to other modification, the strategy of "reference to hard work" avoid direct self-praise. Instead, it emphasizes how tough the work is and how much effort the blogger has invested to make it accomplished.

### Implicit Self-Praise

**Self-praise as sharing.** The strategy of self-praising as sharing is very implicit since the posts always include irrelevant words, emojis, or photos. This strategy is the most frequently employed one in implicit self-praise, accounting for 10.7% of all self-praise strategies. The author's praising intention is revealed by the photos, videos, or the content of the hyperlinks. That means the audience can barely tell the blogger's real intention by observing the words or emojis.

Example 7: 早安。（加作者的照片）

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

In Example 7, the blogger wrote "good morning", which cannot indicate anything personal about her.

However, if we take a look at the attached photo, we will find that the blogger is actually implicitly praising her appearance given all the attached pictures are her selfies, in which she looks pretty.

**Self-praise as a complaint.** The strategy of “self-praise as a complaint” refers to embedding self-praise in the complaint about something. This type of strategy is also frequently-adopted, accounting for 7.8% of all the self-praise strategies.

Example 6: 当长腿帅哥的一天，真烦，老有女生要我微信。（附图作者自拍）

It’s so annoying to be a tall and handsome guy since girls always want to have my WeChat. (The post is followed by the blogger’s selfie)

The above instance appears to be a complaint which can be recognized by the word “annoying”. The blogger complains that girls always want to have his WeChat, which disturbs his life. Nevertheless, it’s not hard for the audience to identify his real intention—That is to show off his appearance and height since he depicted himself as “a tall and handsome guy”.

**Self-praise as denigration.** Besides the above two subcategories, self-denigration can also be adopted as an implicit strategy of self-praise. In this strategy, the blogger always posts self-denigrating words but pretty selfies, which indicates that the blogger is conducting a self-praising act rather than being modest.

Example 8: 我长得真的很像骆驼。（加作者的照片）

I look like a camel. (The post is followed by the blogger’s selfie)

In the above example, the blogger demeans herself by comparing his appearance with the camel. She wrote “I look like a camel”; however, the self-denigrating words are followed by a number of photos of herself in which she looked very beautiful.

## Conclusion

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods, the present study probes into Chinese bloggers’ self-praise strategies on Xiaohongshu, one of the most popular social media platforms in China. We found that three types of self-praise strategies are employed by Xiaohongshu users: explicit self-praise without modification (42.7%), modified explicit self-praise (35%), and implicit self-praise (22.3%), in decreasing order of frequency. Obviously, Xiaohongshu users are inclined to praise themselves in a straightforward manner given the anonymity of the online environment of Xiaohongshu. The present study distinguishes itself from its predecessors by investigating self-praise on Chinese social media platforms rather than face-to-face social conversations. Besides, it contributes to the existing literature about online self-praise within the Chinese context by exploring the self-praise strategies used on Xiaohongshu, a popular yet under-investigated Chinese social media platform.

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