

**A combined analysis of Chinese students in the Netherlands
using Instagram Stories functions to construct
their self-presentation**

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Abstract: Instagram is a popular social media app among Chinese student groups, and one of its functions, Stories, allows users to share their daily life in the forms of photo and video. Compared to traditional Instagram posts, Stories allow users to maintain closer connections with individuals by presenting more casual and real-life moments. Chinese students have a big enthusiasm for exploring the usage of Instagram when they are abroad. This study aims to understand how Chinese students engage with Instagram Stories and construct their self-presentation through an analysis of the affordances and contents of Instagram Stories. The research highlights the unique characteristics of Instagram Stories, where users can present themselves as genuine, spontaneous, and “in the moment”, as opposed to other platforms.

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1. Introduction

A Chinese overseas student may showcase various aspects of his or her life on Instagram Stories, such as attending classes, exploring new cities, trying local cuisines, participating in campus activities, or spending time with friends. For instance, one may post a Story of him- or herself chatting with a friend in a cozy coffee shop, with an extra filter creating a warm and inviting ambiance. Or one may capture the vibrant atmosphere of a university event, and add stickers and texts to highlight the excitement and encourage interaction with the followers, so as to present an active and well-rounded individual. It is a noteworthy fact that some social media that are almost globally accessed, such as Instagram, cannot be used in China due to the Chinese government's Internet censorship policy known as the Great Firewall of China. The policy deploys legislative actions, technologies, and infrastructures aimed at controlling and regulating the flow of information into the country. Despite the imposed limited access to the outer network, the younger generation in China still have a big enthusiasm for exploring those platforms, and when most of them go abroad for study, they begin to experiment with those platforms. Among them, Instagram becomes one of the most popular social media among Chinese student groups, especially for its function Instagram Stories. Instagram Stories is one of the functions provided by the social media Instagram in August, 2016, allowing users to share all the moments in their daily life. Unlike posts on Instagram which can stay permanent, Stories only last for 24 hours and are more characterized by a documentary, narrative, and everyday style (Seyfi & Soydas, 2017). This particular function attracts an increasing number of Chinese overseas students to use Instagram Stories to show their daily life.

Stories are viewed as a chance for people and campaigns to appear more genuine, less refined, and more spontaneous, and “in the moment”, relative to other platforms and features (Zote, 2013). Users can combine several platform functions, including pictures, videos, texts, emojis, and stickers with filters and special effects. They can even use voting systems and interactive elements into one single digital object. Because Instagram Stories are instant and interactive, they can help companies and agencies find

new access to brand marketing, like using Stories to show new products and make online advertisements. In the meantime, Stories also play a role in public opinion polls. Publishers can launch votes, questions, and surveys via Stories. These practices have made Instagram Stories not merely a media broadcast, but more importantly a “living room” that can be glimpsed by others.

Compared to Instagram posts, Stories expand one core and fundamental function of Instagram which is to shoot photos or videos and send them in the moment, allowing users keep close to people, especially celebrities such as idols and actors, in a closer and more direct way. Users always waste more time creating and editing posts to reach a higher quality, which means they need longer time for plans and production to make their presentation glossy and beautified. While Stories can be very short for its not having any restrictions, users can see people in real-time as if at present, other than in a static perfect photo. In this way, people can use Stories to record their daily life more naturally and show themselves with a more casual, random, and real attitude. Based on the above facts and reasons, my research will focus on the content of stories created by Chinese students studying in the Netherlands, to see how they engage and present themselves via Stories.

Despite the growing interest in the research on Instagram, there is a shortage of research on Instagram Stories. One possible reason is that the ephemeral digital contents bring difficulties to the research because the Stories will disappear after 24 hours. Rui & Stefanone (2013) once did a study of self-presentation and image management behaviors on Instagram, examining factors that affect individuals’ shared texts and images in the form of wall posts and photos on Instagram. Manovich (2017) conducted a study on Instagram photos and their aesthetic style, aiming to explore the distinctive characteristics of photographs shared on this platform. Chen et al. (2021) examined the impact of Instagram features (i.e., call to action, Instagram stories, and geotagging) on creating users’ perception of telepresence and social presence, which influence their real engagement behavior. Jaakonmaki et al. (2017) did a quantitative study in which he extracted the textual and visual content features from Instagram posts, and analyzed

their influence on user engagement, so as to see which kinds of Instagram Stories advertisements can reach the highest number of audience and make desirable impressions. There is also research on Stories which usually focuses on marketing. De Oliveira & Goussevskaia (2020) analyzed how influencers make an impact on user engagement by doing marketing using sponsored content.

The study of Instagram Stories currently stops at its marketing potential and social function. As discussed below in this paper, how Stories construct users' daily presentation and images remains to be answered. This research aims to find self-presentation and user engagement on Instagram Stories. Functions and digital objects provided by Stories promote people's use of Stories to show their daily life and personal feelings. The study experiments with digital methods by collecting Stories via a tool called 4K Stogram, an Instagram scraper, and analyzing contents through a tool called Tencent Cloud, which I will introduce in more detail in the following paragraph. 20 Chinese students' accounts are picked by myself considering their accounts' quality, and their Stories are tracked for a week. My overarching research question concerns how Chinese overseas students engage with Instagram Stories and construct their self-presentation. The following three sub-questions are asked:

RQ1. What kinds of Instagram Stories functions do Chinese overseas students usually employ? In this question, I want to know how Instagram Stories have propelled Chinese overseas students to engage in the Stories via its provided functions. For example, functions like “filters”, “stickers”, and “mentioning you in their story and adding to your story” engage people into posting Stories in a great way.

RQ2. What are the contents of Chinese overseas students' Instagram Stories? With answers to this question, I will analyze what kind of content they usually post on Instagram Stories, such as food, entertainment, daily life, and friends.

RQ3. What are the main messages in Chinese overseas students' Instagram Stories? With answers to this question, I will mainly focus on what they want to convey and express through Instagram Stories, to see how they construct their self-presentation through these messages.

This thesis is going to look at Instagram Stories' contents and functions surrounding Chinese overseas students' daily life behavior, the steps of which will be explained in-depth in the chapter on methodology. First, looking into the affordances Instagram Stories provided, this thesis explores how Stories make people willing to engage in them, and how Chinese students employ those affordances. Second, the thesis analyzes how students present themselves in the form of Instagram Stories. This thesis will supplement the research through computational methods to find the composition of the content, and also combine interviews with users with the attempt to fully understand their motivation and contribute to the understanding of the presentation of users on social media.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Platform affordances

Ever since Instagram Stories came into existence with its unique features, companies and brands have been using this function to do advertising and marketing campaigns. Instagram Stories not only enhances consumers' attitude toward advertisements but also increases perceived intrusiveness (Belanche et al., 2019). Except for commercial events, journalism also put various strategies on Instagram Stories, making use of the innovation features on this platform, which brings an upward potential in ephemeral news production (Vazquez-Herrero et al., 2019). While towards ordinary people, the functions of feeds of Instagram Stories are more often used to "express opinions and viewpoints" (Towner & Munoz, 2022, p.223), which is also my research perspective when looking at Instagram Stories.

The technological features of Instagram are unique in its allowing users to tell a simple story, especially focusing on photos and videos (Towner & Munoz, 2022). It's necessary to see Stories from different dimensions including content, what users express through it, and functions, how they use it to complete the content. Bainotti et al. (2021) divide the stories into two categories, the first of which is "content-related codes", which means contents represented in each story. The second one is "Instagram-specific digital objects", namely the platform affordance with various visual elements,

such as specifically stickers (e.g., emoji, gif) and “interactive stickers” (e.g., poll, slide emoji stickers), allowing users creating and beautifying of Instagram Stories (p.8). This theory provides me with a clear framework for categorizing stories, which can be observed during the analyzing process.

Some scholars have already found evidence that Instagram affordances influence the importance of users. Hurley (2019) once demonstrated that Instagram users “use emoji, digital flower-crowns, and fairy-tale decorations, to exhibit self-presentation” (p.6). This kind of Stories can also be found in the group of Chinese overseas students. A report done by Shane-Simpson et al. (2018) proved that, compared to Facebook and Twitter, college students preferred Instagram because of Instagram’s visual features and ability to connect.

A platform’s affordance is always closely connected with user engagement. Instagram Stories feature was conceptualized as human interactivity, which refers to personal activity through a mediated environment (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). As a platform feature, it employs various functions to enhance user engagement, which has a strong connection with social presence. According to Lombard and Ditton’s platform features and presence framework, user presence can be identified by the platform’s form features and content features (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Form features are the characteristics of the medium, which can help generate presence including characteristics of visual display such as the quality, richness, vividness, and interactivity of the medium. While content features are relevant to the content conveyed within the medium, including objects, characters, messages, stories, etc. that are embedded in the delivered content within the form of media, both types can strengthen or weaken presence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). This theory agrees with Bainotti’s, in a sense that both of them have divided Stories into two main categories. Form features are more focused on stickers, filters, and special effects, while content features emphasize photos, videos, and texts on Instagram Stories. The difference is both form and content features here aim at digital objects on Stories. These concepts enable me to categorize and analyze the functions of Instagram Stories more effectively, serving as

valuable references for my classification. This, in turn, helps me to uncover how Chinese overseas students utilize the various features of Stories and to understand their user engagement and behavior through the patterns found in my continued analysis.

Jaakonmaki, Müller, and Brocke (2017) divided factors that help increase user engagement into three groups: “creator (e.g., the creator’s sex, age, and followers’ number); context (e.g., time, location); and content, including textual content (e.g., words, tags) and visual content (e.g., images, videos), and audio content” (pp.1152-1153). Jaakonmaki et al. (2017) found that “photos with people, scenery, and emojis that express positive emotions will bring more user engagement” (p.1157). This category primarily focuses on the viewers' perspective. When considering this concept in my Instagram Stories study, context and visual content are the two main factors that influence how users edit their Stories. On one hand, these functions increase users' inclination to utilize Stories; on the other hand, they have the potential to attract audience engagement through compelling content.

2.2 Self-presentation online

Self-presentation, or impression management, is “the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people” (Leary, 2019, p.2). People’s behavior is usually restrained by others’ impressions even if that’s not their primary goal (Leary, 2019). Users post what they experienced to the audience and create an imaginary space for the audience. In Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy theory, just like the performers on the stage bring “realness” through the act, the goal of self-presentation is to display and convince others of the image’s users construct themselves by selectively providing information. In my case, students go through an intentional selection of the materials when presenting their life abroad, so as to make the audience believe what have happened in their daily life are real. Many users engage in self-presentation because positive self-images can help them realize certain goals like maintaining self-esteem, receiving social acceptance, or even material gains (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

Social media, the Internet-based communication tool, provides new forms of self-presentation. Two key factors influence impression management on social media (Rui

& Stefanone, 2013). On one hand, some people depend on the unique contingencies because of self-esteem which gives them a strong motivation and drive to promote a positive image, and therefore they are more likely to strategically manage the public's perception of their image by choosing certain words, photos, and videos. On the other hand, the strategies are limited by social media in its form, size, and functional diversity. To complete the goal, users will seek approval and show the attractive aspects of themselves (acquisitive self-presentation), and also take measures to avoid disapproval (protective self-presentation) by using social media functions (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

Apart from the above analyses that moves forward from Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Bernie Hogan, a media scholar, proposed a new perspective of using the notion of the "exhibition" to study self-presentation on the Internet. He thought social media is more like an exhibition in which curators will curate artifacts and need to decide which artworks should be displayed (Hogan, 2010). Despite differences, both approaches view self-presentation as a selective process with the certain aim to build an ideal role. However, here needs a new angle to look at self-presentation on Instagram Stories because most users may not consider that much when editing content on Stories; they are just showing an ordinary fact about themselves. Both of those concepts help me to do the analysis on how overseas students use different strategies to construct their Stories and present a certain self-image, and also find what kind of lifestyle and character they want to present from their Stories.

In the study carried out by Rui and Stefanone (2013), they divided factors influencing self-presentation on social media into two categories: "self-provided information (SPI)", information like texts, photos, and personal information provided by profile owners themselves, and "other-provided information (OPI)", the information provided by owner friends which can be seen off his or her profile page. An example of OPI is tagging under personal photographs. Users can digitally "tag" friends who appear in shared photos by linking them directly to their public profile pages. On Instagram Stories, people can send Stories by themselves, and also tag and forward

others' stories which afford SPI and OPI, therefore presenting themselves in multiple ways. This factor will be observed in my study in the following chapters.

Another perspective to understand presentation is through the notion of personal narrative identity. Narrative identity "is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life" (McAdams, 2011, p.99). That means people can make sense of themselves through involvement with others (Frissen et al., 2015). It is a process in which people make a story by selecting their past or anticipation for the future, which can explain how his or her life may be like (McAdams, 2011). When constructing self through life stories, people make references to popular cultural norms and images, metaphors, and motifs they have encountered in social life, and put in use narratives.

Social media can be seen as the access or imagined online space where people get involved with other people. Individuals will not just assign to themselves a role but also change themselves through real efforts. Instagram Stories can be seen as a composition of small digital stories (Page, 2015). Users can decide by themselves what and when to share small pieces of stories through Instagram Stories randomly, and thus exhibit a particular image of themselves to the online audience (Page, 2013). According to Georgakopoulou, Instagram Stories is an unconventional narrative and "a-typical" through texts, images, and videos because they are fragmented and open-ended. And posters can share the "mundane, ordinary and in some cases, trivial events of their everyday life" (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p.268). The perspective of narrative identity can help me understand Instagram Stories as a space for people to create virtual identities by telling stories where they can use different forms of cultural and social norms and metaphors to piece their life. People like Chinese overseas students create one story after another in Instagram Stories based on their experiences, reflections, and insights in life. Also, people can look into one's life through their Instagram Stories for certain functions allowing sending mundane and trivial daily life in the moment representing the user's life and identity. It is possible to see Chinese overseas students' character, lifestyle, life traces, and even personal feelings and opinions just from

Instagram Stories, and one can imagine the personalities of the storytellers as they watch these stories.

To sum up, this thesis integrates the research on platform affordances and investigates their relevance to self-presentation. This research trajectory serves to discover how people use social media affordance to construct online presentations and form their personal identities. Instagram Stories' contents and digital objects are thereby the main research corpus for this analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Affordance analysis

The first thing to do is to understand for which the digital objects Instagram Stories can be used in current conditions. In this way, affordance analysis can be used in discovering the functions as Matthew Curinga said "Software affordances are elements of software systems that allow users to take action" (Curinga, 2014). There are many definitions of affordance and affordance analysis. Affordance analysis is a design methodology combining learning missions with technologies (Bower, 2008). It is also a concept "often used in fields associated with the design and by those systematically studying the impact of a design of an object" (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019). It is also "the potential for behaviors associated with achieving an immediate concrete outcome and arising from the relation between an object (e.g., an IT artifact) and a goal-oriented actor or actors" (Volkoff & Strong, 2013).

Instagram Stories provide various digital objects to its large and varied users and make users adhere to the platform as well as each other, which also serves to cultivate "a narrative style". An overview of digital objects and functions provided on Instagram Stories can help us understand how users engage with the platform. I have divided digital objects into 8 compositions as follows according to Bainotti's study, and have analyzed their affordances and connection with actors, which are users. Then find how users employ them in specific accounts in research question 1.

Table 1 Category of digital objects

Num	Digital objects
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1	Text
2	Images
3	Videos
4	General stickers
5	Interactive stickers (mention, music, question, poll, quiz, donation)
6	Location sticker
7	Hashtag sticker
8	Link sticker
9	Mentions
10	Effects
11	Flitters
12	Drawing
13	Add contents (story, posts, reel from others)
14	Music

3.2 Collecting data with 4K Stogram

4K Stogram¹ is a software that can automatically download Instagram photos, Stories, reels, and hashtags. As the official website introduces, 4K Download is a team of seasoned software engineers, designers, and specialists from different fields who are united to create functional and easy-to-use applications that can make the life of millions of users easier. The project is owned by Open Media, a member of the Apple macOS Developer Program, and has been third-party authenticated by Symantec for code signing on Windows. 4K Download prioritizes the privacy and security of its users and refrains from gathering or disseminating any sensitive data to third-party entities. And considering the privacy of users' data which is against the developer's philosophy, the tool does not keep any records, even of any transaction.

Users can easily utilize the application by entering the desired Instagram username, hashtag, or location. They can then customize their preferences by selecting specific content, formats, and date ranges before initiating the download process with a simple click. 4K Stogram excels in saving Instagram photos and videos while preserving their original captions. It offers the convenience of downloading multiple Instagram posts simultaneously in bulk and allows users to choose specific types of content for

¹ See <https://www.4kdownload.com/-ad0p9/stogram>

downloading. With regards to Stories, the software enables anonymous browsing of Instagram Stories from other accounts and extends the lifespan of Stories from the default 24 hours to a permanent state by downloading them to the user's computer. The downloaded content can be easily stored in the user's local storage for offline access. Once a user's name is entered for the first time, it is saved within the software, eliminating the need for repetitive inputs. By simply clicking the refresh button, users can download new stories each time they open the software. In my research, I selected Stories, photos, and videos, specifying a date range starting from 1 March. By clicking the refresh button daily, I was able to acquire all the stories posted during that period.

Compared to the previous research, my interest focuses on the contents of the group of Chinese overseas students. That means a corpus of Chinese overseas students' accounts needs to be collected. And those accounts need to publish stories more often than others and with fans less than 1,000. Each account will be tracked in a week with StorySaver. At first, I tried to search keywords like “留学生生活 (overseas students' life)” on Instagram to find accounts. But the quality of the posts is not high enough and most of them are agencies' advertisements about how to apply for a degree abroad, and so the results of my first attempt were not desirable. As I have many friends, schoolmates, and acquaintances studying abroad, I decided to pick the accounts up by myself. As the experience of studying abroad varies in different countries, students may present different lifestyles and social values specific to the country's educational system and culture. So, it's reasonable to focus on one country to better examine how a group of people presents themselves under a certain social environment and cultural background. As the author studies in the Netherlands, the targeted group of students are ultimately those who study in the Netherlands.

The Instagram accounts I first followed were from those whom I met in the Netherlands through study and social activities. I also recruited some students who had an interest in my study from our university's Chinese community. Altogether these students made up the scope of my research subjects. After that, I browsed all their Instagram accounts and observed their posts' quality and stories' frequency for two

weeks before moving to the next phase of collecting data. Finally, 20 accounts, including 13 females and 7 males studying in the Netherlands were selected with comparatively high frequency usage of stories whose accounts will be mentioned anonymously considering of personal privacy. The already selected accounts are with a character studying in the Netherlands and using Stories to share their life on a frequent basis. Because all the final selected accounts came from my schoolmates and friends who I met in the Netherlands, the result may lead to certain biases which only represent this small group of students within my social networks. The whole collection was conducted from 1 March to 29 March, around one month, and finally, 336 stories were collected.

3.3 Content Analysis through a computational method

All the Stories were delineated into two main categories: digital objects (Table 1) and content-related code (Table 2) according to Bainotti and Caliandro's (2021) categorization. In this step, I fully analyzed the content in Stories by turning all the videos into photos. Free Video to JPG Converter² is a video editing app, which can convert videos into images after the user uploads the video files. After that, I used a computational method to analyze those photos automatically. Tencent Cloud Image Recognition³ is an open-source intelligent platform based on deep learning that offers a technique that can automatically recognize image content. It is a service provided by Tencent Cloud, which is a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings Limited, a renowned multinational conglomerate based in China. Tencent Cloud offers various cloud computing and artificial intelligence solutions, including the Image Recognition service. Tencent has a strong track record in the technology industry and is known for its commitment to data security and privacy. Image recognition technology is based on the main features of the image. Each image has its characteristics. Image recognition is usually realized by the deep learning algorithm. A convolutional neural network (CNN) is a feed-forward neural network that includes convolutional computation and has a depth structure. It is used for handwritten digit recognition at the beginning and specific

² See <https://www.img2go.com/>

³ See <https://cloud.tencent.com/product/imagerecognition>

object recognition later. The process of Image recognition consists of inputting the image, analyzing it by the neural network, and finally, outputting categorized information.

Tencent Cloud Image Recognition boasts the ability to identify millions of common objects and scenes, including animals, plants, commodities, buildings, landscapes, animations, food ingredients, and public figures, among others. To utilize the service, users can obtain a secret ID and secret key from the access admin console, allowing them to make API calls. By accessing the online API, users can retrieve the name results of various categories and subcategories. To streamline the process, some engineers have developed an interface that eliminates the need for coding. This interface allows me to swiftly collect object information from photos by simply entering the secret ID and secret key. The outcome of Tencent Cloud Image Recognition is a collection of several nouns that represent the composition of the photos.

The Tencent Cloud Image Recognition automatically recognized each content of Stories. It shows the result in several nouns to describe the elements in the photos. There already exist some classifications of stories' affordances and contents from previous research. For example, Towner (2022) once did the contents analysis on presidential election stories and divided the contents into "Promotion, Education, Mobilization, Campaign events, etc." Bainotti et al. (2021) divided the stories into the narrative style and the context of usage. The narrative style includes portrait, composition, materiality, setting, celebration, food. The context of usage includes special events, daily life, mood, interaction, self-display, and aphorism.

I began by reviewing all the photos downloaded using 4K Stogram and the nouns generated by Tencent Cloud Image Recognition. Based on the information gathered, I personally devised categories such as selfie, friends, city, nature, food, object, room, text, screenshot, and more. To further refine the categorization, I referred to the content categories proposed by Towner and Bainotti. For instance, I encountered difficulty as to how, if possible, I should categorize gallery and exhibition under a single column. However, I realized that the term "indoor" could encompass them both while also

providing a contrasting element as it suggests the overall setting. After careful consideration, I ultimately formed nine categories, which are presented in Table 2, delved into each Story accounting for the predominantly visual codes, and, put all the stories into four scenes.

As the contents of stories usually happen in a particular scene or setting, and students use these narratives to express their emotion, state, and moment within the context. The four scenes earlier mentioned are special events, daily life, mood, and interaction. Special events mean the social events and activities the students take part in, usually with a group of people, as opposed to their solitary life. And many students would add words or emojis related to their mood, especially to the screenshots. Interaction here refers to the interactive function like sharing music and forwarding materials from others, which most of the objects recognized by Tencent Cloud are not from their own. This methodology will be applied in answering RQ 2 and 3.

Table 2 Category of content composition

Num	Category	Composition
1	People	selfie, friends
2	Settings	City, nature, travel
3	Food & beverage	restaurant, homemade food, bar & coffer
4	Objects	specific objects
5	Indoor	gallery, exhibition, room
6	Comments	text, screenshot
7	Animals	Animals
8	Music	Music
9	External materials	Entertainment, videos, advertisement

Table 3 Category of the context of the use

Num	Context	Description
1	Special event	Events and activities not from daily life, usually with a group of people, including culture and sports activities.
2	Daily life	Reflection of daily life.
3	Mood	Using photos, videos, words, and emoji related to express their mood.
4	Interaction	Contents are highly related to interaction functions

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The owners of the accounts have been asked for their voluntariness in participation and their permission to have their data analyzed for the research. Ethical considerations are necessary when collecting datasets on social media, especially regarding individual privacy. In order to guard the privacy of the users included in this analysis, all user-related data will be anonymized throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The results of the content analysis are presented in an aggregated format. In instances where individual examples are referenced in the report, I ensured that all information potentially revealing individual identities is carefully redacted. The process of scraping Instagram accounts acknowledges the ethical issues, specifically privacy protection.

3.5 Interview

To validate and reinforce the conclusions drawn from the analysis, adding depth and reliability to the overall findings, I incorporated interviews into the research process. The purpose of conducting interviews in this study is to enhance the research methodology by employing additional and secondary supportive evidence, which serve as a supplement for the content and affordance analysis. Delving into the students' motivations and the impact of their story postings through interviews is crucial for gaining insight into their self-presentation on Instagram. As individuals consciously craft their online personas with careful consideration and strategic intention, understanding the underlying factors that drive their storytelling choices becomes essential. By exploring their motivations and the effects of their story posts, we can unravel the essence of how they present themselves on social media.

A semi-structured interview is applied in this process, mainly aimed at their motivation and behavioral influence. Semi-structured interviewing means “interviewer gets to talk to people to find out about what they have experienced and what they think and feel about something” (Fylan, 2005, p65). Semi-structured interviews involve guided conversations aimed at obtaining specific information, where the interviewer has a predetermined set of questions and a general understanding of the topics to be discussed. The semi-structured format offers flexibility, making it well-suited for

exploring the "why" behind certain phenomena or behaviors, as interviewees have the opportunity to provide in-depth responses and insights beyond the scope of predefined questions (Fylan, 2005).

Having combined with content analysis, I made a list of questions for the interview to achieve a comprehensive interpretation of their self-presentation and engagement. Two interviewees who are high-frequency users of Instagram Stories were selected for the stage. Both of them are students at Utrecht University. And the table shows their profile and background.

Table 4 Information of Interviewees

Num	Gender	Education background	Start the year using Instagram	Frequency
1	Male	Master	2021	Almost every day
2	Female	Ph.D.	2019	Almost every day

Overall, this research approached the Instagram Stories and Chinese overseas students' presentations online from a platform affordances perspective and followed the framework of the dramaturgical theory and narrative identity theory. The literature regarding self-presentation is central to discovering the relationships between Instagram Stories and individuals throughout the analyses. The analysis of the digital objects and contents by computational methods involving relevant research on Stories is essential and meaningful. Interviewing individuals is integral to the content analysis in investigating how Chinese overseas students think of the behaviors of using Instagram Stories.

According to the ethical consideration⁴, participants voluntarily engage in the study, fully aware of the purpose and context. They are informed about how their experiences and opinions will be utilized in the research. Stringent measures are taken to ensure the protection of their personal data. Their recorded interactions are securely stored on my phone and carefully documented. Once the research is completed, all recordings and documents are permanently deleted for the concerns of confidentiality and privacy.

⁴ Ethics consideration: <https://s30.aconvert.com/convert/p3r68-cdx67/a7bh3-hgnce.html>

4 Analysis

4.1 Affordance Analysis

Instagram Stories make possible a lively interaction between users and the platform, thus becoming an effective way for the users to make promotions. And users share behind-the-scenes stories in an instant state and timely mood (Kreling et al., 2022). The main feature of Stories is ephemerality, first popularized as the unique affordance of Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016). The images on the channel are indicative of what is happening in the moment, which decides self-presentation on the platform more spontaneously and randomly. Another feature is visibility, which means “to make their behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections . . . visible to others” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p.150). Stories’ visibility is not as higher as that of posts, whose visibility is adjustable, with options including just for friends, not that much public for everyone, and hiding stories from certain followers. On the contrary, Stories can offer greater visibility when one becomes a fixed audience especially when it appears in the Story slide.

There is always an association between platforms and users, including individuals via friend lists, individuals, and content (Kreling et al., 2022). Stories do not afford greater association than posts because of the features of lower persistence of content and fewer ways of response like comments and replying each other. But Stories often serve as a catalyst for deeper conversations, as people's interest in a particular story can significantly influence their engagement in meaningful dialogues.

Stories also afford a greater chance of editability. Content can be edited many times as the user desires before sending it (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). As an interactive way of communication, Instagram Stories combines digital media like texts, graphics, moving images, and soundtracks, into a single organized “digital computerized environment” that enables people to interact with the data for various purposes. The main interface of a Story is the content itself. Users can directly upload photos and videos from their mobile phones or press the button to record. They can also simply click the “create” from the left of the interface, and just type the words on the screen.

There are also functions like “boomerang”, dynamic photos, “layout”, and typesetting of contents on the left. The bottom row is for different effects, which can be used for shooting photos and videos.

After loading the photos or videos from a mobile phone, users can find the four main functions on the right top, to add words, stickers, effects, and to draw. Stickers serve a much broader purpose than traditional emojis, encompassing a wide range of interactive media options. Users can add location, mention, questions, music, poll, quiz, question, website link, hashtag, and donation through this function. By incorporating these elements into their photos and videos, users make their current scene more visible and expressive. The combination of words and interactive stickers enriches the posts, making them not just static images but dynamic storytelling mediums that effectively convey real-time events and emotions.

Those kind of combination aggregates different media forms and access into one simple story, which plays a significant role in enabling self-expression. By incorporating text and stickers onto photos and videos, the user not only enhances the depiction of the current scene but also effectively conveys their emotional state and psychological experience within that moment. For instance, with the multiple media provided by Stories, users can add location stickers to showcase their current whereabouts or highlight a specific place they visited, and therefore they are allowed to share their experiences and connect with others who may be familiar with or interested in that location. Mention stickers enable users to tag and acknowledge others in their stories, fostering social connections and interactions. Individuals who frequently use these mention features tend to display a more outgoing and socially interactive persona, often likening themselves to a “social butterfly”.

Mentions and adding mentions also encompass both “self-provided information (SPI)” and “other-provided information (OPI)”, enabling audiences to perceive the interconnections between individuals and to gain insights into one's character through the perspectives of others.

Although Stories are ephemeral, many aggregations of different media forms make them a cohesive and sustainably productive series. Users can seamlessly integrate various content elements, creating a narrative that persists over time. This persistence enables users to shape their self-expression by constructing a coherent and lasting representation of their experiences and emotions.

In short, these affordances on Instagram Stories provide users with a wide range of tools and options with which they can express themselves creatively, engage with their audience, share experiences, and prompt interaction. They serve as a dynamic and interactive storytelling platform that goes beyond the traditional photo or video sharing, allowing users to customize their stories and create more engaging and interactive content.

Table 5 Affordances and user engagement of Instagram Stories

(Towner & Munoz, 2022)

Num	Digital objects	Affordances	User Engagement
1	General Sticker	Different types of stickers ranging from emojis to colorful text.	Creative and reinforces Message.
2	Interactive sticker	It includes polls, chat, questions, countdowns, and donation asks which mainly ask for a response.	User engagement, Sense of community, Market research.
3	Location Sticker	A physical location is placed on the sticker.	Find the story in exploring the sense of community.
4	Hashtag Sticker	Hashtags (#) surround the text.	Find the story in exploring connects to an issue.
5	Link Sticker	Sticker taking consumers to the specific website	Direct call to action Consumer engagement
6	Text/Text overlays	Written text on a static image or video and transcript of audio posted on video	Increase the likelihood that the message is understood
7	Handle/Tag	Denotes another account by tagging with a @. Often used when reposting material.	Build community. Creates exposure for another account/reshare

Following the guidance of Lombard & Ditton’s theory (1997) of content features and form features, this study divides the digital objects of Stories into 12 main functions: text, images, videos, general stickers, interactive stickers, location stickers, hashtags, links, mentions, drawings, add contents (story, posts, reel from others) and music. Each Story has been labeled in different functions manually. Effects, especially filters are not included in the collection as it’s hard to discern visually.

4.2 Content Analysis

4.2.1 Functions Composition

The table below shows the different types of functions used on Instagram Stories, along with the number and percentage of Stories that used each function. These functions afford a chance to help Chinese overseas students enhance their content and engage with their followers. The percentage of affordances shows the Chinese overseas students' using habits and preferences.

Table 6 Functions use percentage

Functions	Num	Percentage
Image	228	69%
Text	188	57%
Video	65	20%
Mention	54	16%
General Sticker	41	12%
Location Sticker	40	12%
Add contents	39	12%
Music	22	7%
Interactive sticker	11	3%
Hashtag	2	1%
Link	2	1%
Drawing	2	1%

The most commonly-used content feature is the image, which is present in 69% of the Stories collected. Images are the most commonly used function because they are visually appealing and can quickly convey a message or mood. They also allow users to showcase their experiences or products in a more engaging way than the plain text. Most of the Stories are purely an image without any text explanation or even without any beautification which may just be that people want to show a real scene.

Text is the second most commonly used function, appearing in 57% of the Stories mainly because it allows users to provide additional context or information for their images or videos. In the Stories, the text always plays an auxiliary role compared with images, video, or other functions. It can also be used to create eye-catching headlines or captions that grab the viewer's attention. And the most distinctive part of the text in Stories compared to posts and other platforms is that text can be used alone without

other mediums to express users' feelings and opinions, which is very often seen in Chinese students' stories, especially teasing or making humorous comments, somehow like the function of Twitter.

Videos are also used frequently, but not as much as images and text; they are present in 20% of the Stories. It is less commonly used than images and text mainly because they require more effort in creation and may not always be necessary to convey a message. However, they can be effective in certain contexts, such as capturing a live event, a dynamic moment, and unexpected reactions.

Mentions, which are relatively common, and allow users to tag other users in their Stories, are present in 16% of the Stories collected. In this way, it can increase visibility and engagement with each other and also allow users to give credit or collaborate with others in a higher association, as Treem & Leonardi (2013) mentioned. Differentiating from other platforms or posts, Stories make it possible for the people who are mentioned to add content to their own stories, which is a way to generate high interaction and association with each other, a way of connection between individuals (French & Bazarova, 2017). It can be always used in scenes of eating, hanging out, and taking group selfies together.

General stickers and location stickers, which allow users to add additional graphics or location tags to their Stories, are used in 12% of the Stories. General stickers refer to emojis, colorful texts, and GIFs. Those stickers can express people's moods or show behavior vividly. And location stickers can transmit the message of where things happened. They are mainly used to convey information or to make recommendations about restaurants, scenic spots, and the like. Those functions can add an extra layer of fun or context to Stories. They are relatively easy to use and can help users stand out from others who may be posting similar content.

Adding content, which refers to adding stories, posts, and reels from others, is used in 12% of the Stories. The essence is the behavior of "forward". Among the additions, stories from friends who mentioned the same moment is the most commonly seen, which is the result of a corresponding function of "mention". And in this way, people

don't need to edit stories by themselves just easily forward others' stories showing socialization. Based on the interview, filters, stickers, location, mentions and adding content from friends are the most often.

Music is present in 7% of the Stories, hence Music is less common. There are two ways to insert music. One is to insert music into the content as its background music, enhancing the mood or atmosphere of a Story. The other one is to share music from Spotify, which is more often seen in Stories. The first interviewee showed his inclination to insert music into Stories, and also to put activity links from Story especially when he does recommendations and promotions. Interactive stickers, such as polls, and quizzes, present in 3% of the Stories, are used less frequently because they require more effort to create and may not be relevant to every type of content. Among the interactive stickers, "this day of that year" can be seen in some students' stories, especially when it comes to those who have used Instagram for a long time and with a sentimental character. This particular sticker serves as a stimulus for them to memorize the past. The second interviewee tended to insert many photos with different shapes, and sometimes use questions, polls, and "this day of that year". Hashtags, links, and drawing features are used less, appearing in only 1-2% of the Stories. They are used the least frequently because they are not as essential for creating engaging content as the other types of affordances do. Especially hashtag is rarely seen compared to posts, mostly because Stories are used to show daily life but posts sometimes aim to catch attention.

These functions collectively serve as the props for the "acting on the stage" of social media. As Hogan (2010) suggests, social media platforms can be likened to exhibitions, and these functions act as tools for users to plan and curate their own exhibitions. When audiences view these stories, they become more immersed in the narrative. In this way, Stories allow for greater audience participation and connection. This form of self-presentation enables audiences to actively engage with the content and to have a feeling of being part of the stories being shared.

4.2.2 Content Composition

This table shows the frequency and percentage of different types of visual content shared on Instagram Stories.

Table 7 Content composition

Num	Content	Frequency	percentage
1	People	67	20%
2	Outdoor	58	17%
3	Food & beverage	56	17%
4	Objects	44	13%
5	Indoor	37	11%
6	Comments	33	10%
7	Animals	16	5%
8	Music	13	4%
9	External materials	12	4%

The type of content shared on social media platforms is often driven by factors such as personal interests, social norms, and the features of the platform. The categories “portraits” and “materiality”, which are frequently observed on Instagram, both reflect the most prevalent visual components (Hu et al., 2014). This suggests that specific visual aesthetics, deemed as ideal for Instagram, consistently persist even though Stories themselves may not last long. Due to the nature of social media as a platform for self-presentation and social connection, students often use social media to share information about their personal lives and to connect with friends, also because of the convention of selfies on Instagram (Hess, 2015). The most common type of content is related to “people”, accounting for 20% of all the content. The category of “people” includes students’ selfies, selfies with friends, and personal or group photos. Some of them are without any background, while some of them are highly connected with food and scenery, which show a specific scene like traveling, being at activities or events.

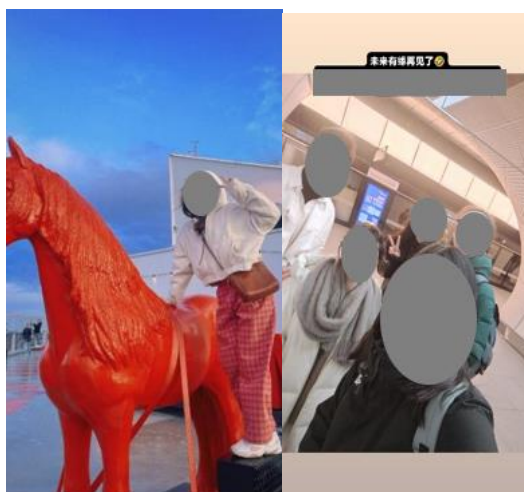


Figure 1 Selfies and selfies with friends

“Outdoor scenes”, usually including cityscapes, nature, and travel, are also popular, accounting for 17% of the content. Words like “Grass”, “night”, and “landmark” can be found through Tencent Cloud Image Recognition’s output. These types of content can reflect Chinese students’ feelings and attitudes toward Netherlands’ urban life and the living environment.

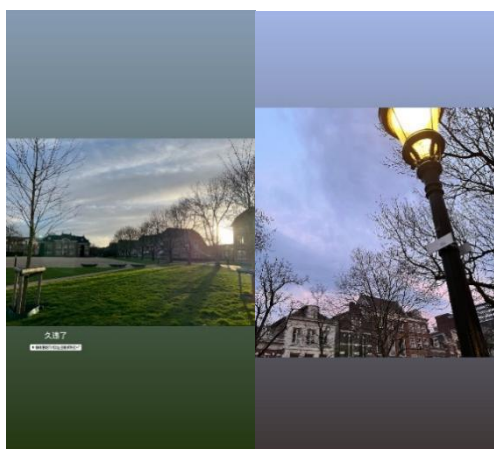


Figure 2 Outdoor scenes

Food and beverage-related content make up another 17%, followed by “objects” at 13% and “indoor scenes” at 11%. Additionally, food and travel content are often popular on social media platforms (Lee et al., 2021) because they are visually appealing and can evoke a sense of aspiration and envy among viewers. Cooking food by themselves and eating in restaurants are two main visual themes in this category which can reflect a country’s food culture and living habits. The students also intentionally show off their cooking skills through the created content.



Figure 3 Food in restaurants and cooking at home

“Objects” include all specific objects Chinese students have spotted, like a flower, a sculpture, or a painting. Some of them are things found in their daily life which give them little surprise and happiness. Some are deep thoughts. Some of them are the things they have seen in an exhibition. Previous research proved that one of the motivations to shoot and share is “to collect key objects, to share something interesting, fun or aesthetically appealing, to inspire or as a building material for self-identity” (Budge, 2017). This category always transmits the sense of beauty or serendipity of everyday life. Different from “objects”, galleries and exhibitions from the category of “indoor” often show the indoor environment or space, instead of showing just a single artwork. Room-tour is another theme which is often seen in the category of “indoor”, in which students would show their living environment.

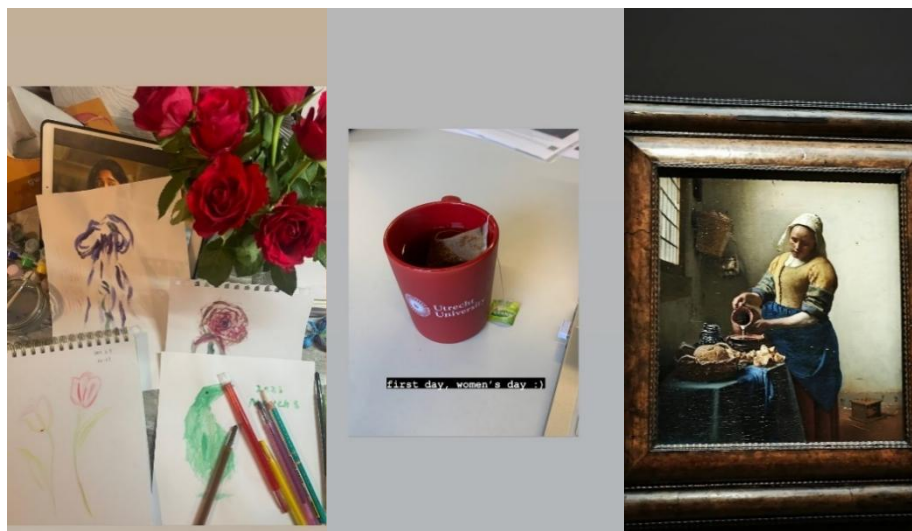


Figure 4 Objects

“Comments”, which account for 10% of the content, are a special category among all the types of the visual content, as their creation is not necessarily in need of a camera. They are often made of screenshots from TV, movie, chats, and are always accompanied by several sentences. In particular, screenshots of a chat (in Chinese social media) are manifested singularly in Chinese students’ groups. They would express their teases and other feelings on those screenshots.

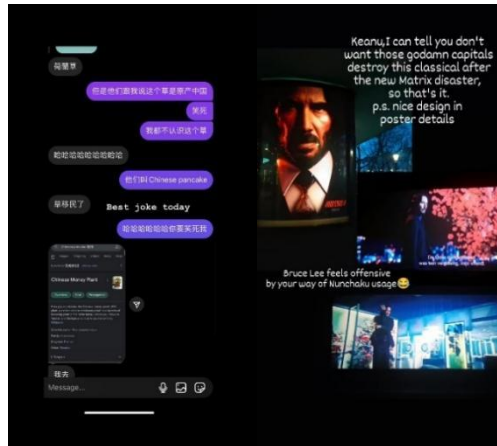


Figure 5 Comments

“Animals” and “music” each account for around 5%. Cats are the most often seen animal as some Chinese overseas students may raise cats or go to play with cats. Fawns are also seen often as they can easily be found in some parks. “Music” is also a special category that has no visual content. There is only the imported song from Spotify. (For this part, I have analyzed in the affordance analysis.) “External materials” like entertainment, news, and advertisement-related content, are the least common, accounting for only 4% of the content. They are those contents forwarded by some official accounts, media accounts, and other people’s accounts. The data shows that material objects, indoor settings, text and screenshots, animals, music, and entertainment/news/advertisement content are also shared on Instagram Stories, but less frequently than the top three categories. These types of content may reflect personal interests or hobbies, and may be used for self-expression or to share information with others.

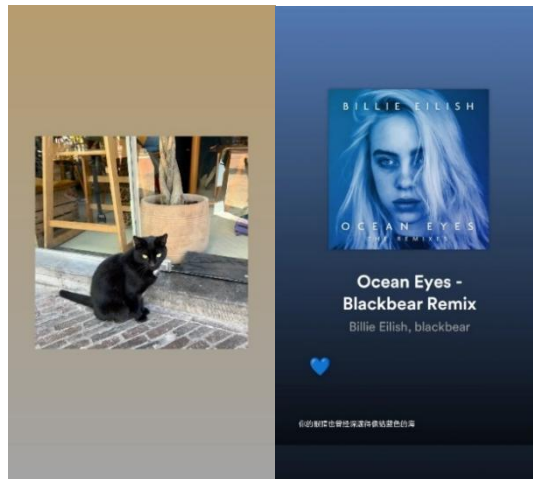


Figure 6 Animals and music

From the two interviewees' perspectives, the most often sent contents include activity, social life with friends, and recent mood. And different people show distinctions from each other. The first interviewee is a crazy fan of the movies, so he has a high frequency of sending movies and reviews. And the second interviewee prefers sharing music from Spotify. Also, as a female, she tends to send her selfie both with herself and with friends, and she also shares photos showing her dressing styles often.

Chinese overseas students tend to focus on visual content when presenting themselves, particularly images, personal videos, and outdoor scenes. They also enjoy sharing content related to food and objects, such as fashion items or products. Interestingly, a significant portion of their shared content is related to text and screenshots, indicating that they also use Instagram Stories as a means to exchange information and to share thoughts. Sometimes the Stories are only shown to close friends under the Stories' affordance of control visibility. And those contents are mostly related to pure texts (especially when in Chinese) and screenshots. Some of them are even negative emotions and thoughts, which can be seen as a behavior of students' sharing inner thoughts exclusively with close friends. In this sense, Stories allow users to maintain private and have control over their content. By limiting the audience to trusted individuals, people may feel more comfortable sharing personal or sensitive moments without worries about the consequence of showing them to a wider audience.

With intimacy and exclusivity, these Stories foster a stronger personal connection with people’s close friends. Some stories are more relevant and interesting for close friends, like inside jokes or exclusive events. By sharing these stories only with close friends, users ensure the content is tailored to the specific group's interests. Sharing stories with close friends implies a higher level of trust and comfort, enabling users to express themselves confidently. This feeling of trust fosters deeper connections and interactions within the circle of close friends.

4.2.3 Context of Stories

Table 8 Context composition

Num	Context	Frequency	Percentage
1	Special events	27	8%
2	Daily life	139	41%
3	Mood	133	40%
4	Interaction	37	11%

The “daily life” category occupies the highest percentage in stories (41%). Among “daily life”, many contents relate to students’ surroundings and things that have happened on one particular day. These are recorded like a diary. In contrast, the "special events" content takes up the lowest percentage (8%) in stories, which suggests that Chinese overseas students are not so active in events or activities taking place in the Netherlands. Some students join certain events but not that many. Those events include parties, clubbing, cultural events, and sports training. For example, a photo shows that people all dressed up in fancy clothes under a spotlight. Students’ content that concentrates on events can transmit the message that their social life is rich. The mood takes up the same percentage as daily life (40%), which represents many Chinese overseas students tend to use Stories to record their state of mind. Some photos are looking at daily life but are covered with certain words and emojis expressing their feelings, which may a little bit overlap with daily life, as some scenes may trigger their thoughts or bring on mood swings. And some of them vent out their feelings or even tease about things that are showed in the photos.

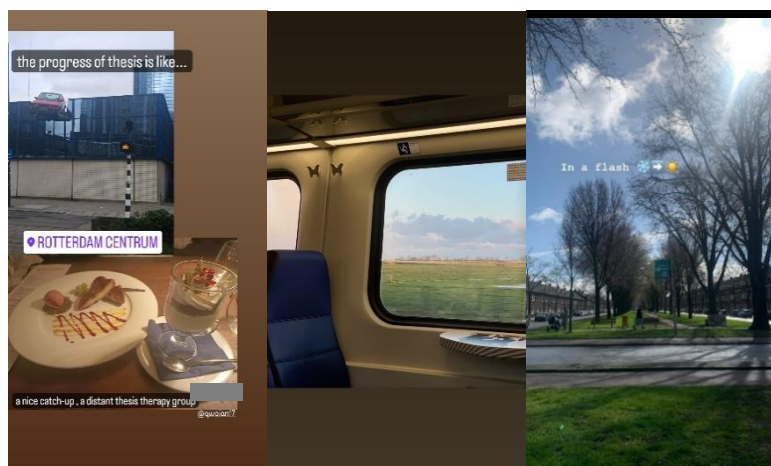


Figure 7 Daily life

Table 9 Category in context composition

Context	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Special events	People	17	63%
	Outdoor	5	19%
	Objects	2	7%
	Indoor	2	7%
	External materials	1	4%
Daily life	Outdoor	41	29%
	Food & beverage	27	19%
	People	25	18%
	Objects	20	14%
	Indoor	20	14%
	Animals	6	4%
Mood	Comments	32	24%
	Food & beverage	26	20%
	Objects	20	15%
	People	19	14%
	Indoor	14	11%
	Animals	10	8%
	Outdoor	10	8%
	External materials	2	2%
Interaction	Music	13	35%
	External materials	9	24%
	People	6	16%
	Food & beverage	3	8%
	Outdoor	2	5%
	Objects	2	5%
	Comments	1	3%
	Indoor	1	3%

Different contexts have different categories of compositions which represent how students use photos and videos to show the context. In the context of “special events”,

the most commonly occurring category of content is “people”, making up 63% of the total stories. The “people” category in special events tends to feature individuals in a distinct environment or at a specific location, which can be easily distinguished from their daily life. Additionally, events and activities are inherently social. Stories that record these social occasions tend to involve more interactions with people and promote a higher level of engagement, which suggests that individuals tend to feel more connected and involved in online interactions that mimic real-life social situations.

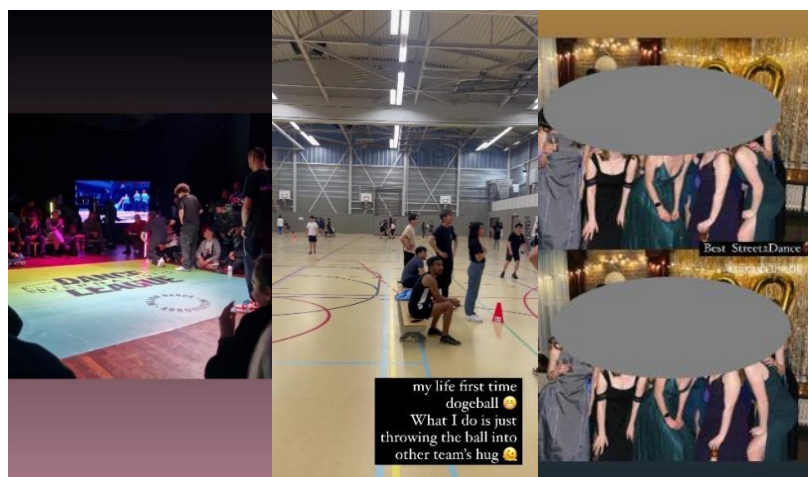


Figure 8 Special events

The content “outdoor” is predominantly used in the context of “daily life” (29%), indicating that city and nature make up a significant portion of the daily life experience of Chinese international students. This is because the cityscape is often the most noticeable difference for students when they go studying abroad. Additionally, the “food & beverage” category (19%) appears to be an important aspect of their daily life, highlighting the role of food in cultural exchange and adaptation. The “people” category is also prominent in “daily life”, including selfies and pictures with friends, which reflect their life and networking in a foreign country. Chinese overseas students tend to share pictures and videos of their daily activities that emphasize outdoor settings, food, and social interactions, as a way to document their experiences and maintain their cultural identity.

“Comments” is the most frequent category among “mood”. As the text is the most effective way to express one’s feelings. Most of them are related to the weather,

unexpected things happening on the street, heavy study load and grades, judgment on chats between each other, or happiness from enjoying delicious food, scenery, and gathering with friends. This is also one of the reasons why the second content is “food & beverage”, accounting for 20% among the total posts, compared to “mood”. Enjoying food at home cooked by students themselves can give them a sense of achievement. Trying out delicious food in restaurants can also bring happiness to students studying abroad. Chinese students also tend to share content that revolves around their interactions with others, often in the form of music videos or posts related to news and advertisements. Under the context of interaction, the most frequent category of content is undoubtedly “music”, accounting for 35% among the total posts, followed by “external material” at 24%.

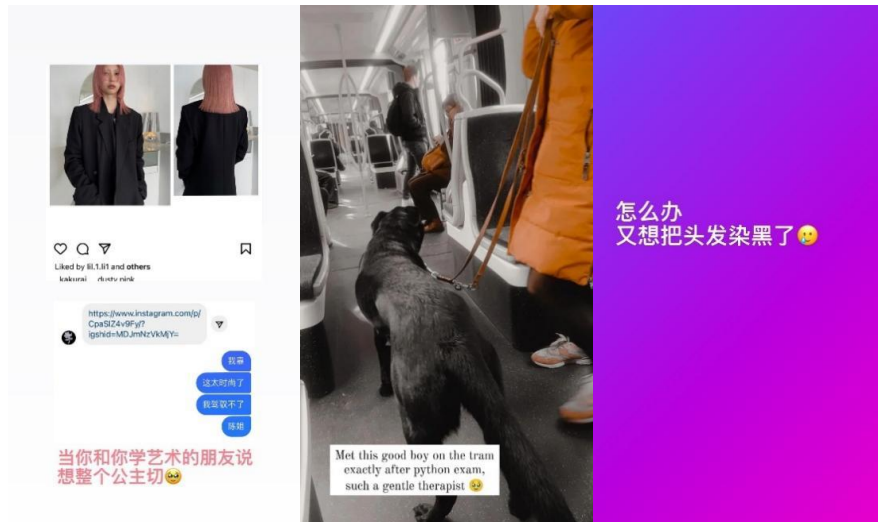


Figure 9 Mood

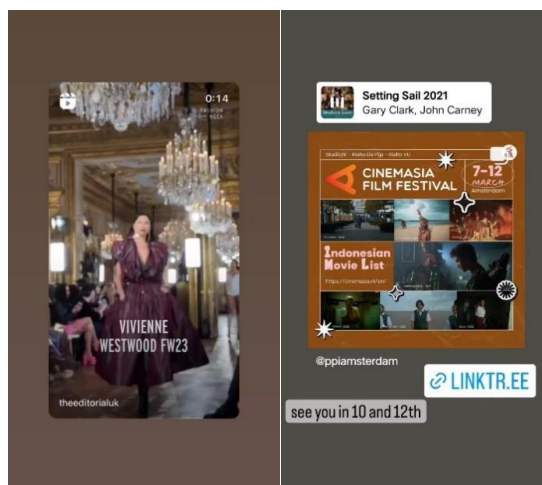


Figure 10 Interaction

Overall, Chinese overseas students tend to focus on posting stories about their daily life and emotions rather than special events or interactions. Instagram serves as a storytelling tool that allows individuals to convey changeable concepts like time, place, and space within their narratives (Seyfi et al., 2017. p.59). Despite the fragmented nature of Instagram Stories, these fragments come together to form a complete image. Stories provide students with a platform to present their life and their perspective of the Netherlands. The percentage of content shared reflects the insights and views of Chinese overseas students, which can also influence how their followers perceive the Netherlands and how the study life there might be like. Drawing on Goffman's concept (1959) of “objects” being able to create a setting and define a situation for observers, we can understand how social media is utilized by the group of Chinese overseas students to convey a tailored message to their followers, shaping and managing their perceptions. Stories not only exhibit the performative and exhibitionistic nature described by Goffman and Hogan but also reveal aspects of a person's character and sustain consistent self-presentation. Also, Stories differentiate from other social media functions by emphasizing authenticity and minimal embellishment. The focus lies in curating the content shared, rather than heavily modifying the photos or videos themselves. The embellishment of stories is primarily achieved through the use of interactive functions that enhance the storytelling experience and make the narratives more engaging.

4.3 The origin and influence of Chinese overseas students' self-presentation on Instagram Stories

Interviewee 1 has been living in the Netherlands for one and a half years and is currently pursuing a master's degree at Utrecht University. He started to use Instagram at the end of 2021 when he came to the Netherlands to complete his premaster program. And the second interviewee is a Ph.D. student from Utrecht University who has been in the Netherlands for a year and she started using Instagram in 2019 the moment when she went to Taiwan for an exchange. Since then, she has kept the habit of using Instagram. Both interviewees are highly active on Instagram Stories, browsing through

it daily and sometimes posting Stories more than three or four times a day.

The two interviewees both have the same reasons for starting to use Instagram Stories. One of the shared reasons is that they want to share life with their local classmates and friends. And also, as a form of social interaction, they want to communicate with and keep connections with local and international students via this media, even in a comparatively shallow way. The first interviewee even said it could help him blend in with the lifestyle here.

Recalling his life since he came to the Netherlands, the first interviewee said he reduced the frequency of using Chinese social media like WeChat, in order to engage more with his current life circles. For him, Stories are like a limited life circle while he is studying in the Netherlands. When he goes back to China, he may use it not that frequently. While the second interviewee still used Stories after she went back to China mainland as it already becomes an important part of her life. Both of them think their Stories are timelier and simpler. It does not stay for long so there is no need to think a lot when sending the Stories. For example, one interviewee said: “The Story is timely and simple. It won’t stay permanently. You can post it right away and don't need to think much. It’s easier for people to post it right away and not have to worry about any other long-term impact.”

At the same time, a Story doesn’t take up much of the user’s space, as it has its own section. Story audiences are “self-selecting” (McRoberts et al., 2017, p.6905), “meaning that audience members have to actively decide whether to watch a certain Story, whereas Posts are more frequently read by chance while simply scrolling through the Feed” (Kreling et al., 2022, p.4) . If people are interested in you, then they will click on you and vice versa. Therefore, people feel freer to send a story and have fewer worries. And the interviewees also mentioned that their international friends were also more inclined to use Stories.

As previous research has suggested, Stories can only be replied to via private messages without public comments as so the function is less social (Kreling et al., 2022), however, during the interview, the third aim, social function, is emphasized by

interviewees. On the one hand, Stories do provide many social and interactive functions like polls and questions. If one sends a question on Story, people who have responded can thus further discuss among themselves. On the other hand, if the audience derive the same feelings from the story as the sender do, or they are just out of curiosity, then the audience can strike up a conversation. These kinds of chats can tie up people's connections and relationships compared to posts' simple comments.

Instagram Stories it's a platform that meets the demand of the desire of sharing. Instagram Stories transmit life inspirations, and make friends know about the sharer's hobbies and even personalities. It is also a representative of how to achieve the aim to "make one's presence felt", which means people do something to attract notice and attention. The Stories function helps to present a person, and with the encouraged interaction and communication, people get a chance to know more deeply about the personalities. It helps to present oneself in broader and more abundant ways than other platforms and media. It is also a tool for recording, helping people record the moments and memorize what had happened if at some point in the future they want to look back at the old days. This sets it apart from the previous fake images created and shared on social media platforms. Compared to "stage performances", it is more akin to a "miniature documentary recording". The second interviewee doesn't pick out content manually and carefully as when she does with posts; instead, she sends content very randomly. While the first interviewee still would spend time checking the information and polishing his content to some extent as he is still afraid of disturbing others and wants to form a certain character even to a small degree.

Instagram Stories brings both positive and negative influences to users. Stories can be a reflection of life, as well as a great way for people to express themselves, share their experiences, seek empathy, and connect with others. It can provide a platform for people to seek out like-minded individuals and form communities through shared interests. It helps people get away from the isolated state of being, which is also why people more like to present the real side about themselves on Stories. Additionally, Stories can expose users to new information, cultures, and perspectives by allowing

them to see the experiences of people from around the world.

However, there are also negative aspects of Instagram Stories that can impact users. For instance, the desire to constantly check Stories and see who has viewed them can lead to a sense of anxiety and addiction to social media. Response expectations mean that users on Instagram expect to receive more likes than comments (French & Bazarova, 2017). In Stories, “likes”, the expected responses, are low, and therefore it is not necessary to respond to such low-effort posting (Trieu & Baym, 2020). While from the perspective of interviewees, the pressure to receive comments and likes on Stories can be mentally exhausting and make users feel insecure and inadequate. As Stories has the feature of checking whoever has watched your contents, the sender will check if their friends have watched their story, how many friends have watched it, and if the people they care about have watched it. The time and energy required to create and check Stories can also be a significant drain on users' resources, taking them away from other aspects of their lives.

Many people might feel a sense of connection and engagement with others when looking through their Stories, as the two interviewees noted. They might be motivated to participate in similar activities or events happening in the Netherlands, and get interested in trying new things, such as cooking the dishes that friends have shared in their Stories. Sometimes people might feel left out or unsure about the timing of events that others have shared in their Stories. They might also use Stories as a way to check with friends and acquaintances and engage in social interactions. For those who are less acquainted, looking through someone's Stories might be a way to learn more about the person's lifestyles and interests.

Throughout the research process, I consulted the classifications and studies conducted by Bainotti et al. (2021), Lombard & Ditton (1997), and Jaakonmaki, Müller, and Brocke (2017) to investigate the functions and content of Stories. Digital objects, such as interactive stickers, contribute a sense of playfulness to users' media consumption, fostering their inclination to utilize these features. This, in turn, boosts user engagement and diversifies their self-presentation. In addition to photos and videos,

Stories incorporate interactive elements, questions, interactions with others, and textual reflections. These sub-functions collectively foster a greater sense of authenticity among individuals online, alleviating the sense of a distant and fictional persona associated with the virtual account.

The distribution of various functions and specific content on Stories reflects the image and life status of Chinese overseas students in the Netherlands. By analyzing the proportions, we gain insights into the predominant types of content shared by this group on Stories. The diverse range of media employed in Stories results in vivid and dynamic presentations. While the content remains a personal choice, involving performative aspects as described by Goffman, the specific content presented reflects the current reality without much thinking. Through the accumulation of these genuine fragments, which consistently portray a part of their true selves, individuals become less driven by strong intentions or self-interest to present themselves. Instead, they foster social interactions and interpersonal connections.

5 Conclusion

This thesis targets Chinese overseas students and their use of Instagram Stories as a means of self-presentation. The study focuses on the affordances of Instagram Stories, their content, and the motivations and influences behind their use. To answer the research questions, a combination of affordance analysis, content analysis, computational methods, and interviews has been utilized.

In terms of the RQ1 about Instagram stories functions, the results show that the most commonly used affordances by students are images, text, and videos, which are still the predominant forms of media on social media platforms. Additionally, Stories offer some unique affordances, such as “mentions”, “general stickers”, “location stickers”, and “adding content from others”, which enhance the socialization between people on Stories.

In terms of the RQ2 about Instagram stories contents, the composition shows that the most common content posted on Instagram Stories are images of “people” (portraits and friends), “outdoor” (city scenes, nature, travel), and “food and beverages.”

“Material objects” (such as fashion items, gadgets, etc.) and “indoor scenes” (gallery, exhibition, room) are also frequently posted. The majority of these posts are shared instantly upon capturing photos or videos, while others still embody the process of selecting and editing to present how their life looks like. The content is highly connected with Stories’ functions. The platform’s features, including distributing images and videos quickly, interacting with friends, and the instantaneous nature of the content, have contributed to the variety of stories.

In terms of the RQ3 about main messages in Instagram stories, the results show that the distribution of content varies across the different contexts, highlighting the different ways in which students present themselves. Specifically, the “daily life” context has the highest percentage of stories, suggesting that Chinese overseas students in the Netherlands are not very active in special events. In addition, they tend to feature outdoor views in their daily life stories and focus on people in their special events stories. They use the fragmented stories to show their thoughts, emotions and moods, not only to record their experiences but also to convey their impression and understanding of the Netherlands. They want to convey information about their feelings about the Netherlands, and also the culture, scenery, and food so as to make comparisons with those in China.

Back to the main question, except for using regular media to shape their image on Stories, Chinese overseas students utilize various stickers to enhance the richness of their content. Digital objects such as mentions, general stickers, location tags, and added texts are used to showcase the places they have been to, the activities they have participated in, their social abilities, and interpersonal relationships. These digital objects not only help Chinese overseas students display their life abroad but also convey their perceptions and thoughts about the Netherlands and various topics. During the process of self-presentation, some Chinese students prefer to present the landscapes and environment of the Netherlands, such as leisurely lifestyles, afternoon coffees, and intense studying. Others prefer to display their social lives, as networking plays an important role for them. This includes sharing their participation in events, going out,

and showcasing food. They incorporate facial expressions, stickers, digital objects, and texts into their content to make it vivid and timely, reflecting their activities, and emotions.

However, the accounts selected for the study are limited and not comprehensive, resulting in a small sample size of stories collected. Although students tend to post more frequently during holidays, the collection process occurred during regular times, which may explain the limited number of stories. Furthermore, since Stories are a complex media form with overlapping categories, it can be challenging to categorize the content accurately. As a result, the study may have a small deviation in its results. The interview sample size of only two participants is quite small, which also brings limitations to the study, so the experiences and motivations of these two individuals may not accurately reflect those of other Chinese students using Instagram Stories. This can lead to a narrow understanding of the topic being studied and increases the likelihood of bias, both in terms of the selection of participants and the interpretation of their responses.

Future studies could focus on specific holidays or festivals, such as the Chinese Spring Festival when overseas Chinese students tend to post more frequently. It is worth noting that Instagram Stories have even launched special stickers and features to encourage students to post more stories on Spring Festival. These efforts could potentially increase the number and variety of stories collected, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how students use social media during specific times of the year.

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