The Attitudes of University Students towards a Feminine Style of Internet Language in Email: A Quantitative Study in the South of China

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Abstract

This study focuses on the feminine language style widely used on the Internet by the younger generation in China at the present time and investigates the attitudes of 211 university students with respect to three emails employing different levels of feminine Internet language: minimally feminine Internet language (MiL), moderately feminine Internet language (MoL) and highly feminine Internet language (HiL). The results show that the informants held positive attitudes towards HiL, especially in terms of solidarity, whereas MiL was evaluated comparatively highly in terms of status. The social variable of gender had no impact on the positive evaluation of HiL, which provides grounds for suggesting that the younger Chinese generation is likely to accept and adopt feminine style Internet language, regardless of their own gender.

Keywords: attitude, email, feminine, Internet language, gender, status, solidarity

Internet use has been growing rapidly and the demography of Internet users has been changing in depth and breadth over the past two decades. According to statistics reported by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2011), there were 485 million Internet users[1] in China by June 2011. The report also specified that 55.1% of the country's Internet users were male and 44.9% were female. Although the percentage of male Internet users had

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[1] In Chinese, Internet users are called 网民 (*wǎngmín*, netizens). The term is derived from the concept of "citizens dwelling on the Internet". The CNNIC report took into account Chinese residents, aged 6 years or above, who had used the Internet in the previous six months.

decreased slightly and that of female users had grown very slightly compared with 2010, the level of male use was still 10.2% higher than that for female use. The fact that women tend to use the Internet less than men has been extensively evidenced by other studies (Kirkup, 1995; Scragg & Smith, 1998; Shashaani, 1997).

This disparity appears to go against the "democratic theory" that has been widely discussed in relation to Internet communication (Yates, 1997; see also Guiller & Durndell, 2007; Herring, 1993a; Nowak, 2003; Rice & Love, 1987; Siegel et al., 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Due to social anonymity on the Internet and the loss of a great deal of the non-verbal information that exists in face-to-face interactions, Internet communication is believed to be free from a variety of the cues of hierarchy, status and power, such as gender, race and class (Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). In other words, it has been hypothesised that the lack of visual cues related to the natural physical world should have a democratising effect on Internet communication and thus might result in "gender-free equality online" (Guiller & Durndell, 2007: 2242). Such a theory maintains that people are not able to identify the biological sex of other users on the Internet, where the physical body is absent, and that, consequently, their perceptions are not influenced by social judgement of the addressee's gender. Conversely, a number of research findings suggest the opposite to this democratising context, one in which Internet communication has been said to be set (e.g. Herring, 1993a, 1994; Lea & Spears, 1992; Panyametheekul & Herring, 2007). People still manage to adapt communication on the Internet in order to facilitate categorising other users by sex, even in the absence of physical cues. On the other hand, some studies (e.g. Nowak, 2003; Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) have found support for the existence of a utopian equality and democracy in cyberspace. For instance, Nowak (2003) found that her participants' perceptions of the online addressees' genders did not have an effect on the style of communication. The current study will further examine the democratic theory from the perspective of attitudes towards the feminine style of Internet language.

Based on the findings of the survey by the CNNIC, the age brackets 20–29 and 10–19 ranked as the largest and second-largest groups of Chinese Internet users (with 30.8% and 26% of all Internet users respectively), and students accounted for the single largest body of Internet users in China (as high as

29.9%). In fact, the majority (56.1%) of the Internet users surveyed by the CNNIC were educated to senior high school level or higher and 11.7% had been educated to degree level or above. For this reason, the current study chose to concentrate on a sample of undergraduate students in order to explore the attitudes of Internet users who are part of the vanguard of Chinese Internet development.

Although English is the most widely used language on the Internet (26.8%), the number of Chinese-language users has been increasing dramatically, jumping from around 14% in 2005 to 24.2% in 2011 (IWS, 2012). Unlike English-language users, who usually perceive the Internet as an "information highway", Chinese Internet users are generally young people who tend to consider the Internet an "entertainment highway" and search the web for entertainment rather than for information (Koch et al., 2009). The feminine style of Chinese Internet language is one example of the creative use of the Chinese language in the context of accessing the Internet for entertainment purposes in China.

The current study will look into the development of the feminine style of Chinese Internet language on the basis of an attitudinal study. Language attitudes are thought to provide explanations of the underlying motivations for linguistic variation and change (Garrett et al., 2003: 12; Labov, 1984: 33). Therefore, an investigation of the attitudes of the predominant user group on the Internet in China, university students, towards the feminine style of Chinese Internet language should help explain why certain Internet language features are adopted. Specifically, the current study aims to position itself under the framework of the democratic theory in order to investigate: (1) the overall attitudes of university students towards the feminine style of Chinese Internet language, (2) evaluations of the feminine style in terms of solidarity and status, and (3) whether the factor of gender has an effect on the evaluation of the feminine style and the possible explanations for this. The paper will first introduce existing studies of language and gender on the Internet in order to outline the features of the feminine style of Chinese Internet language, which will guide us to the research design.

1. Introduction to studies on language and gender on the Internet

A number of studies exist on gender differences in access to and the use of computers and the Internet (e.g. Brosnan & Lee, 1998; Kirkup, 1995; Li & Kirkup, 2007), as well as research on gender differences in communication (Lakoff, 1975; Coates, 1993) and on attitudes towards languages, varieties of language and language variations (Eckert, 1989; Kramer, 1977; Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1972). However, very few studies have focused on gender differences in Internet communication (Allen, 1995; Sussman & Tyson, 2000) and there is a particular scarcity of research on attitudes towards Internet language.

Internet language – also termed "netspeak", "cyberspeak", "electronic language" or "computer-mediated communication" (CMC) – refers to a type of language consisting of "features that are unique to the Internet" (Crystal, 2001: 18). The use of the term "netspeak" or "cyberspeak" emphasises the interactive and conversational elements of this language, whereas "electronic language" and CMC are usually associated with the medium itself, i.e. computers and the Internet. Although the core characteristic of the Internet is interactivity, it is nonetheless a medium almost entirely dependent on reactions to written messages. The type of language under investigation here primarily involves reading and writing rather than listening and speaking (Chen, 2010: 5–6; Crystal, 2001; Liu, 2002: 12). Therefore, we adopted "Internet language" as an umbrella term in the current research.

Abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons are widely perceived as the three most significant features of English Internet language (Baron, 2011). Chinese Internet language is believed to have its own distinctive linguistic features at the lexical, syntactical and discursive levels (Gao, 2006). The current study will focus solely on the lexical level of Chinese Internet language.

Due to the logographic nature of the Chinese language,[2] the Chinese writing system has been gradually adapted for use on the Internet (Yang, 2007) and these adaptations exemplify its use for entertainment purposes. The five main adapted forms most commonly found on the Internet are: stylised Mandarin (e.g. 漂漂 piàopiào for 漂亮 piàoliàng, "beautiful"), stylised dialect-

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[2] Chinese belongs to Sino–Tibetan language family and uses a writing system based on characters rather than an alphabet. Chinese language learners must learn both the pronunciation and tone for each character, rather than just the pronunciation of a word, as is the case in English.

accented Mandarin (e.g. 偶 ǒu for 我 wǒ, "I, me, my"), stylised English (e.g. 粉丝 fěnsī for "fans"), stylised initials (e.g. "bt" for 变态 biàntài, "abnormal") and stylised numbers (e.g. 886 bāibāilìu for 拜拜啦 bāibāila, "Byebye lah [interjection]"). As seen from the examples, these adaptations of the language for use on the Internet are achieved through three types of creativity in the use of words: (1) abbreviation, such as "bt" for 变态 biàntài; (2) homonyms or near-homonyms,[3] such as 偶 ǒu for 我 wǒ; and (3) interjections, such as 886 bāibāi[lìu] for 拜拜啦 bāibāi[la]. One further creative use on the Internet is also a feature of English Internet language: (4) the use of emoticons, which has been commonly mentioned and researched in the studies of Chinese Internet language (e.g. Chen, 2011; Duanmu, 2011: 98–99; Lin, 2002: 26–27). Generally, these four features demonstrate the overall characteristics of Chinese Internet language at the lexical level. The section on research methodology (see section 2.2) will discuss the application of these four creative uses of Chinese words in emails to represent the feminine style of Chinese Internet language.

Gender differences in communication have been extensively studied (e.g. Coates, 1993; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Holmes, 1992). As long ago as 1975, Lakoff suggested that women's language tends to be associated with the language of the powerless, whereas men are seen as speaking the language of the powerful. Other gender-related stereotypes are that male speech is usually linked with such characteristics as boastfulness, loudness, aggressiveness and dominance. In contrast, female speech tends to be perceived as emotional, gentle, expressive and verbose (Antill, 1987; Briton & Hall, 1995; Coates, 1993; Kramer, 1977; Lakoff, 1975). However, relatively few studies have investigated gender difference in Internet communication (Allen, 1995; McCormick & Leonard, 1996; Savicki, Lingenfelter, & Kelley, 1996; Sussman & Tyson, 2000; Topper, 1997).

Herring (1994) has revealed that, according to her ethnographic observations and surveys, women and men demonstrate distinctive styles in posting to the Internet, which is contrary to the suggestions of other scholars that the Internet neutralises distinctions of gender (Chmielewski, 1998; Martin, 1998; Otomo, 1998). The male style "is characterized by adversariality: put-

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[3] The term "homonyms" here refers both to words having exactly the same pronunciation but different meanings and to two words that are near-homonyms (*xiéyīnzì*) but with different tones and meaning (An, 2003; Chen, 2011: 22; Zhuang, 2010: 6–7).

downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm" (Herring, 1994). On the other hand, the female style "has two aspects which typically co-occur: supportiveness and attenuation" (ibid.). "Supportiveness" refers to expressions of appreciation, thanks and community-building, which make other participants feel accepted and welcome. "Attenuation" alludes to hedging and expressing doubt, apologising, asking questions and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions (ibid). Therefore, the four creative uses of Chinese Internet language to represent the feminine style should also demonstrate these two characteristics. This will be explored in section 2.2.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research instruments

This study employed a semi-structured questionnaire that included a variant form of the matched-guise test to explore students' attitudes towards the feminine style of language used on the Internet. The matched-guise test is an indirect method of attitude measurement (Lambert et al., 1960). It has been widely used in attitude studies (Garrett, Coupland & Williams, 2003) in order to obtain in-depth information on perceptions of language variations (Buchstaller, 2006; Campbell-Kibler, 2005) or varieties of language (Bayard et al., 2001; Dailey, Giles & Jansma, 2005; Hiraga, 2005; Ladegaard, 2001; Lam, 2007; McKenzie, 2008; Zhang, 2010).

Generally, the matched-guise technique involves producing a series of recordings using the same speaker who can represent each language or language variety. Then the informants are asked to listen to each recording and rate each recording according to a semantic-differential scale: friendly/unfriendly, sociable/unsociable, highly educated/poorly educated, etc. (see also El-Dash & Busnardo, 2001; Lyczak, Fu & Ho, 1976; Nesdale & Rooney, 1996; Williams, 1974). However, the variant form of the matched-guise test that was adopted in the current research presented three emails, instead of recordings, to the informants and asked them to evaluate the "writer" of each email on a 5-point semantic-differential scale developed from previous studies on attitudes to language varieties in the Chinese community (Candler, 2001; He & Li, 2009; Lyczak, Fu & Ho, 1976; Zhang, 2010).

2.2 The design of the three emails

The emails were adapted from an authentic email written by a young female scholar (25-30 age group). The three emails varied only in terms of the frequency of the use of feminine features displayed in each one (see Table 1 below): Email One contained features of highly feminine language (HiL henceforth), Email Two (the original email) contained moderately feminine language (MoL henceforth) and Email Three used minimally feminine language (MiL henceforth). Since MoL was originally composed by a female writer, it was adapted to MiL by minimising all four features: (1) the abbreviation was written using the full characters, (2) all the homonyms and near-homonyms were switched to the original words, (3) all interjections but one were deleted, and (4) all emoticons but one were removed. Conversely, HiL was created by increasing the number of homonyms/near-homonyms, interjections and emoticons. The total ratios of these four features of Internet language to the total number of words are: 25% for HiL, 13.56% for MoL and 0.04% for MiL. Therefore, the frequency of these features in the three emails decreases significantly from one to the next. Table 1 also provides examples to show the use of four features of Chinese Internet language in the current study.

Table 1. Use and the frequency of Internet language features in the three emails

Four features of Chinese Internet language	Examples	Number of instances in HiL, MoL and MiL
Interjection	啊 a for "ah"	HiL: 7
		MoL: 3
		MiL: 1
Abbreviation	酱紫 jiàngzǐ, "sauce purple", for 这样子 zhèyàngzǐ, "this way"	HiL: 1
		MoL: 1
		MiL: 0
Homonym/ Near-homonym	小盆友 xiǎo pényǒu, "little basin-friend", for 小朋友 xiǎo péngyǒu, "little friend"	HiL: 4
		MoL: 2
		MiL: 0
Emoticon	:-)	HiL: 4
		MoL: 2
		MiL: 1

I will now move on to discussing the design of the text, focusing on the choice of words used to represent the feminine style.

Interjections can serve a hedging function by mitigating the certainty of a statement in order to express the meaning tentatively, a manner frequently identified as a characteristic of female language (Kramer, 1977; Lakoff, 1975; Palomares, 2008). A number of interjections were consequently included in HiL, while fewer were used in MoL and only one in MiL.

Indeed, not every abbreviation, homonym/near-homonym or emoticon can be said to demonstrate the feminine style. As a result, the choice of the three types of words is based on the principle of representing the two identified features of feminine features, i.e. attenuation and supportiveness.

Regarding the abbreviation, 酱紫 jiàngzǐ, literally "sauce purple", was used for 这样子 zhèyàngzǐ, meaning "this way". In fact, this abbreviation is believed to have been adapted from Taiwan-accented Mandarin and is often used by young Chinese people (Chen, 2009; Gao, 2008). This abbreviation, among others commonly used by Chinese university students, is vivid and humorous (Gao, 2008), something helpful in adding friendliness and efficiency to the communication (Hu, 2010). It therefore demonstrates supportiveness by displaying friendliness to the addressee. Since it was difficult to find another abbreviation that would have fitted in the context of the email and the criteria of feminine features, the same abbreviation was kept in both MoL and HiL and no others were added.

All four homonyms/near-homonyms incorporated in HiL have completely different meanings from the original words (see below); this is thought to inject a note of humour into the communication (Zhou, 2013). This feature, the addresser displaying humour to the addressee, indicates supportiveness, a feature of the feminine style, since it attempts to include the addressee(s) in the communication. Therefore, it should be considered a characteristic of the feminine style of Chinese Internet language. These homonyms/near-homonyms are:

Original word	Meaning	Homonym/Near-homonym	Meaning
xiǎo péngyǒu	*Little friend*	*xiǎo pényǒu*	*Little basin-friend*
wǒ	*I*	*ǒu*	*An image (noun) Accidental (adj.)*

liǎo	Particle	*niǎo*	*Bird*
de	Possessive particle	*dī*	*A drop of water*

Due to the written nature of Internet interaction, the loss of many forms of non-verbal behaviour generally seen as typical of female speakers is inevitable (Briton & Hall, 1995; Kramer, 1977). However, emoticons can be used to convey a message in greater and more expressive detail. In particular, a positive emotion is more frequently used by women (Colley et al., 2004). For this reason, two emoticons expressing happiness (i.e. smiley faces) were included in HiL. A further two emoticons were also used: one appears in the first line of HiL ('-_-|||') and is intended to convey the feeling of embarrassment due to the lateness of the reply to the addressee's email. It is consequently considered to display hedging and apology, which can be seen as forms of attenuation. The emoticon in the second line ('T_T') of HiL is actually a crying face, expressing sympathy for the addressee, which is intended to display supportiveness. The number of emoticons was reduced to two in MoL and only one (a smiley face) in MiL.

After the three emails were formulated, they were reviewed by two linguistics research students and then piloted with six university students (three female and three male) to confirm the use of Internet language displaying the feminine style. All eight participants believed HiL was most likely to have been written by a female, while four thought MoL sounded feminine and most were uncertain of the gender of the writer of MiL. In other words, the eight participants became less and less certain regarding the gender of the writer of HiL, MoL and MiL when the frequency of the feminine features decreased. The pilot study confirms that the Internet language features used in the three emails indeed incorporated supportiveness and attenuation and that they consequently truly reflected the feminine style of Chinese Internet language.

Furthermore, one question in the questionnaire created for the present study was designed specifically to investigate the extent to which the informants believed the emails were written by a woman. This was done in order to determine whether the feminine features were interpreted as such by the informants and whether an increased occurrence of such features would

make them more likely to consider that email was composed by a woman.[4] As expected, the results show that HiL was rated highest, with a mean score of 3.87, followed by MoL, with 3.24. MiL came last with a mean score of 2.54.

In addition to the variant of the matched-guise test, the questionnaire contained two other sections: one for basic demographic information and one for information on Internet access and use. Eight multiple-choice or open-ended questions were included in order to assess the extent of the students' experience with computers and the Internet (Li & Kirkup, 2007). The questionnaire was initially constructed in English and then translated into Chinese. The translation was checked by two professional linguists who are bilingual in Chinese and English. The questionnaire was also piloted with a group of nine university students from one of the institutes where the actual research was later conducted.

2.3 Participants
The sample of the population chosen for this study consisted of Chinese students who were studying at two universities in the south of the People's Republic of China. All informants were asked about their personal background, including their name, major subject and year of study, in order to rule out any informants who were specialising in linguistics or a language-related subject. Of the 211 Chinese informants aged between 19 and 25 that participated in the study, 98 were male and 104 were female.[55]

The current study was conducted in Guangzhou, P. R. China, over a six-month period from July 2011 to December 2011. The entire research process was conducted in Chinese, the native language of all the informants and of the researchers. Following the completion of the data collection, the informants were debriefed regarding the purposes of the study and the research methods used.

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[4] After reading each email, the informants were asked, "To what extent would you think the above email was written by a woman?" They stated their evaluations of each email on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much".
[5] Please note that 9 of the 211 questionnaires did not give information regarding their gender.

3. Research results and discussion

This section presents the results generated from the three parts of the questionnaire.

3.1 Overall, status and solidarity ratings
Table 2 presents the average ratings of the three emails. A paired sample t-test was used to assess the statistical significance of the difference between the mean ratings of any two emails. A line in bold type indicates the existence of significant differences: between the average ratings of HiL and MoL (t=3.14, df=192, p=0.002, <0.01) and between the average ratings of MoL and MiL (t=3.36, df=198, p=0.001, <0.01). HiL was rated highest, followed by MoL. MiL, which contained the fewest feminine language features, was rated lowest. This could suggest a positive attitude towards the feminine style used on the Internet since the students rated the email containing the highest number of feminine language features most positively.

Table 2. HiL, MoL and MiL average ratings

	Mean	Std. Deviation
HiL	3.64	.60 (p<0.01)
MoL	3.53	.53 (p<0.01)
MiL	3.38	.64

Since there were 211 informants, in evaluating three emails for 12 personality traits (such as "friendly", "honest", "sincere" etc.), the questionnaire produced 633 responses for each of the 12 traits. We therefore used Principal Components Analysis (PCA, or factor analysis; see Field, 2009: 638) to reduce the amount of data to a more manageable size in order to conduct a more specific analysis. The outcome of the PCA is shown in Table 3.[6] Seven traits were loaded on to Component 1 (status): "elegant", "well

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[6] The rotated component matrix is a way of easily identifying each variable with a single factor and thus each factor will tend to have either large or small loadings of any particular component. These loadings of a component decide which factor this variable should belong to (*Name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process*, 2010: 144). Following Stevens' (1992: 382) suggestion, the cut-off point for the loadings was set at 0.4 for the current study.

educated", "honest", "sincere", "intelligent", "humble"' and "pleasant".[7] The five remaining traits, "modern", "warm", "creative", "social" and "friendly", were loaded on to Component 2 (solidarity).

Table 3. Rotated component matrix

	Component	
	1 (Status)	2 (Solidarity)
Elegant	.77	
Well educated	.81	
Honest	.72	
Sincere	.63	
Intelligent	.71	
Humble	.60	
Pleasant	.57	
Modern		.82
Warm		.62
Creative		.74
Social		.67
Friendly		.56

The status rating for each email was generated from the ratings for the seven traits in Component 1, which were identified by means of the PCA. As shown in Table 4, MiL was rated highest on the status dimension. MoL was ranked second and HiL was rated lowest. However, the paired-sample t-test revealed that the differences in the ratings did not reach statistical significance.[8] Thus, while differences are certainly to be found in the evaluations of the three emails in terms of status, the ratings do not differ significantly from each other.

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[7] The trait "pleasant" is loaded on both Component 1 and 2 with values of 0.553 and 0.546 respectively. Given the preponderance of ratings obtained from the PCA, I chose to group this trait into Component 1.

[8] MiL and MoL: t=0.83, df=200, p=0.41, >0.05; MoL and HiL: t=1.95, df=195, p=0.053, >0.05.

Table 4. Status and solidarity ratings for HiL, MoL and MiL

Status	Mean	Solidarity	Mean
MiL	3.45	HiL	4.00 (p<0.01)
MoL	3.44	MoL	3.64 (p<0.01)
HiL	3.38	MiL	3.24

The solidarity ratings for each email were generated from the five traits in Component 2 identified by the PCA: "modern", "warm", "creative", "social" and "friendly". Using a paired-sample t-test, two significant differences were found in the rankings (represented in Table 4 above by a line in bold type): HiL was evaluated highly and to a significant level (t=8.38, df=204, p=0.00, <0.01); MoL was rated rather less highly, while MiL received the lowest ranking (t=8.05, df=206, p=0.00, <0.01). These results indicate that the informants tended to evaluate an email higher on the solidarity dimension when it displayed more feminine features. Therefore, we may safely conclude that there exists among Chinese students a positive attitude towards the feminine style of Internet language from the point of view of solidarity.

The effects of the informants' socio-demographic characteristics on formation of attitudes were also investigated using statistical tests. The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test was employed for this part of the analysis since it is commonly used to investigate the interactions between an independent variable (in this case, gender) and two or more dependent variables (the HiL, MoL, MiL overall, status and solidarity ratings; see Zhang, 2010). A MANOVA test helps to investigate whether the independent variable "differ[s] along a combination of dimensions which are formed by more than one dependent variable" (Field, 2009: 594).[9]

The MANOVA test results show that the effect of gender on the evaluations of the three emails did not reach statistical significance: $F_{(6, 174)}$ = 1.45, p=0.21, >0.05. Therefore, the informants' gender did not have a significant effect on the overall ratings of the three emails. Interestingly, this result indicates that the relatively positive attitude towards HiL is not

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[9] Although a separate ANOVA for each dependent variable tends to be employed when there is more than one dependent variable under investigation, multiple ANOVA tests are thought to increase the chance of making a Type I error (Field, 2009: 586).

conditioned by the factor of gender. Both male and female informants evaluated this email in the same way, which generalises the positive attitude to HiL to a certain degree.

3.2 Female writer
One further question was designed specifically to investigate the extent to which the informants thought the emails might have been written by a woman. After reading each email, they stated their evaluations on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much". The average HiL, MoL and MiL ratings for this question are shown in Table 5.

Based on the paired-sample t-tests, the informants' evaluations confirm that HiL most obviously demonstrated a feminine style as it was considered the email most likely to have been written by a woman (t=9.05, df=210. P=0.00, <0.01). MiL, with the fewest feminine features, was evaluated as the least likely to have been composed by a woman (t=9.71, df=210, p=0.00, <0.01).

Table 5. Descriptive results, according to informants' gender, for HiL, MoL and MiL for the question, "To what extent do you think the above email was written by a woman?"

	Overall	Male	Female
Likelihood of female writer for HiL	3.88 (p<.01)	3.86	3.89
Likelihood of female writer for MoL	3.28 (p<.01)	3.09	3.46
Likelihood of female writer for MiL	2.58	2.55	2.61

The results of the follow-up one-way ANOVA tests show that the evaluation differences between male and female on HiL and MiL were so small that they did not reach statistical significance.[10] In other words, both male and female informants agreed that HiL was the email most likely to have been composed by a woman and perceived this as being what a woman might "sound like". On the other hand, MiL, which contained the fewest feminine language features, was deemed the most unlikely to have been written by a woman. This finding demonstrates the stereotypical view of the feminine style of Internet language. Interestingly, in comparison with the ratings obtained from the male informants, the female informants demonstrated greater certainty regarding the gender of the MoL writer, which contained a

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[10] HiL: F (1, 200)=0.72, p=0.79, >0.05. MiL: F(1, 200)=0.27, p=0.60, >0.05.

moderate amount of feminine Internet language features: F(1, 200)=11.69, p=0.001, <0.05.

3.3 Preference for the feminine style

Another question was designed specifically to investigate preference for the feminine style of Internet language. After reading each email, the informants were asked: "To what extent would you like to write an email like the one you have just read?" They stated their preference for each email on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much". The overall HiL, MoL and MiL ratings for this question are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. HiL, MoL and MiL descriptive results, according to informants' gender, for the question, "To what extent would you like to write an email like the one you have just read?"

	Overall	Male	Female
Preference for HiL	2.13	1.90	2.33
Preference for MoL	2.73	2.47	3.00
Preference for MiL	3.03	3.10	2.96

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to investigate the statistical significance of the difference between the overall means of two sets of ratings: between the preferences for HiL and MoL (t=-8.07, df=210, p=0.00, <0.01), and between the preferences for MoL and MiL (t=-3.02, df=209, p=0.00, <0.01). Overall, MiL was evaluated most favourably, followed by MoL. HiL was the least preferred email. This finding seems to contradict the results of the verbal-guise test. In other words, the informants evaluated the feminine style of Internet language positively as readers but showed least preference for this style when they were asked if they would compose an email in such a way.

A one-way ANOVA test was carried out in order to examine whether the independent variable of gender had a significant effect on the informants' preference for the feminine style of Internet language. Table 6 also presents the differences in preference for HiL, MoL and MiL according to gender. In general, the female informants gave higher evaluations than the males for Internet language with more feminine features (i.e. HiL and MoL; see Table 6), whereas the male respondents stated a clear preference for MiL, which has the fewest feminine features of Internet language of the three emails. To a

certain extent, the female informants demonstrated a higher preference for the feminine style than the male informants.

Indeed, the follow-up one-way ANOVA test confirms that gender had a significant effect on the evaluations of HiL, F(1, 200)=9.68, p=0.00, <0.01, and of MoL, F(1, 200)=12.23, p=0.00, <0.01. However, the differences in preference for MiL did not reach statistical significance: F(1, 199)=0.76, p=0.38, >0.05. That is to say, when an email was composed in a highly feminine style of Internet language, the female informants demonstrated a greater preference for it than the male informants. When an email had very few feminine features, both male and female informants showed the same level of preference for it.

3.4 Possibility of using the feminine style

After reading each email, the informants were asked to evaluate this question: "If you were to write an email to a woman, to what extent would you write it like the one above?", on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much". The HiL, MoL and MiL overall ratings for this question are shown in Table 7. This question is different from the one in Section 3.3 since it places an emphasis on the potential addressee being female by adding the condition of "if you were to write an email to a woman". This means we can investigate whether the informants would perceive the emails differently when they realise the reader will be a woman.

Table 7. Descriptive results, according to informants' gender, for HiL, MoL and MiL for the question, "If you were to write an email to a woman, to what extent would you write it like the one above?"

	Overall	Male	Female
Likelihood of using HiL to write to a female friend	2.43	2.16	2.66
Likelihood of using MoL to write to a female friend	2.74	2.51	2.97
Likelihood of using MiL to write to a female friend	2.80	2.84	2.80

The paired-sample t-tests show that HiL was evaluated least favourably by the respondents (t=-4.32, df=210, p=0.00, <0.01). In a manner consistent with the results presented in Table 6, the female informants offered higher HiL and MoL evaluations, which contained the highest and second-highest levels of feminine Internet language features respectively, while the male informants

evaluated MiL higher, which demonstrated the least feminine style of all three emails.

According to a one-way ANOVA test, the effect of gender was significant in the evaluations of HiL: $F(1, 200)=10.07$, $p=0.00$, <0.01, as well as MoL: $F(1, 200)=9.60$, $p=0.00$, <0.01. In other words, the female informants gave higher ratings for HiL and MoL than the male informants did when asked about their preferred style for writing to a female friend. Although there was difference in the ratings for MiL in terms of gender, the one-way ANOVA test revealed that the differences did not attain statistical significance.[11] Therefore, it is likely that both the male and female informants shared the same attitudes towards the use of MiL when addressing a female friend. Namely, if they had to choose one of these three emails, both groups preferred MiL to HiL/MoL, even when the addressee is a woman. This result seems consistent with that presented in Section 3.3: the effect of gender was significant in the evaluations of HiL and MoL but no significance was found in MiL. However, a closer look at the gender differences in these results indicates that the male informants gave higher ratings to HiL (2.16 vs. 1.90) and MoL (2.54 vs. 2.47) and lower ratings to MiL (2.84 vs. 3.10) when they were told the recipient of the email was female (see Table 7) than when they were unaware the sex of the email's reader (see Table 6). A possible explanation for this is that the male informants might have considered a moderate use of the feminine style to express a certain degree of closeness to the female addressee, or at least that they might adopt writing features that are often identified with the addressee in order to establish effective communication.

4. Discussion

The research has established that HiL, MoL and MiL were ranked in descending order of preference in the overall and solidarity ratings. The finding that the social variable of gender had no impact on the positive evaluation of HiL provides grounds for suggesting that the young Chinese generation seems to accept the feminine style of Internet language, regardless of their own gender. As far as status is concerned, MiL was ranked first. One possible explanation

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[11] MiL: $F(1, 200)=0.06$, $p=0.80$, >0.05.

for this is that the features demonstrated in HiL are usually linked with powerlessness. O'Barr and Atkins (1998: 385) have argued that women's speech features appear "to be more closely related to social position in the larger society" than those of men's speech and that this kind of style would therefore be better considered "a composite of features of powerless language".

In the current study, HiL contained the highest number of emoticons, homonyms and interjections, which function as features of the feminine style of Chinese Internet language, and is therefore linked with powerlessness. In contrast, MiL contained the fewest of these features associated with powerlessness. It is thus unsurprising that the informants evaluated MiL most positively in terms of status – a dimension where power is an important element. Interestingly, the informants showed a clear preference for MiL when the questions pertained to the informants' perceptions of the style used for email composition. As observed above, MiL contains the fewest feminine features and consequently it was evaluated most positively in terms of status. Therefore, MiL was the preferred style for composition, probably owing to the fact that it is unlikely to convey an image of powerlessness to the addressee(s).

Previous research has shown that women are more likely than men to use the standard forms of a language (Coates, 1993: 183; Gordon, 1997; Eckert, 1998: 66; Eisikovits, 1998: 51; Trudgill, 1972), which might explain the absence of a significant difference in the attitudes of the male and female informants towards employing MiL in email writing. Since MiL displayed the fewest features of the feminine style of Internet language, it was the closest to a standard form in comparison with MoL and HiL, which contained a greater number of feminine features. It is not surprising, then, to find that the female respondents also preferred to adopt a style that is close to standard usage. However, it should be noted that women's preference for adopting standard forms does not disprove the existence of a feminine language style. Given the fact that there are certain distinct features of feminine language, women might want to use the standard form in order to deliberately avoid the feminine style and consequently conceal their female identity.

The feminine style stereotype is demonstrated in the finding that the HiL email was considered the one most likely to have been written by a woman. In the absence of physical cues, the informants allocated a gender to the composer of this email by observing the high frequency of feminine features

demonstrated in HiL. This kind of gendered stereotype has been documented in a number of studies which show that women are seen as being more polite or conservative, or that they tend to use emotional and tentative language more than men (Colley, et al., 2004; Eckert, 1998: 66; Haas, 1979; Lakoff, 1975; Palomares, 2008). The use of feminine features in HiL would make it sound much more tentative and supportive, but also less assertive, than MoL and MiL. Consequently, it fell into the category of what women "sound like" in the perceptions of the participants. However, the fact that there was no significant difference between the attitudes of the male and female informants indicates that Chinese women accept this stereotype to some degree.

In a comparison of the results for "preference for the feminine style" (section 3.3) with those for the "possibility of using the feminine style" (section 3.4), the male participants seemed to be comparatively more willing to adopt the feminine writing style when they were told the recipient was a woman. This result echoes Herring's (1993b; cited in Yates, 1997) finding that men tend to adjust their writing style in order to achieve effective communication. From a different perspective, this finding also confirms that the choice of words in communicating in the virtual world is still consciously or subconsciously associated with the conventional social perceptions of gender.

In general, although the Internet offers the possibility of escaping the bounds of gender expectations and has the potential to provide a neutral space, freedom of expression and equalised participation (Chmielewski, 1998; Martin, 1998; Otomo, 1998; Sproll & Kiesler, 1986; Sussman & Tyson, 2000), the current study indicates that gender differentiation and power associations still play an important role in Internet communication. In line with the previous studies that also found gender variation in online communication (Guiller & Durndell, 2007; Herring, 1994; Herring & Paolillo, 2006), this finding does not support the assumptions of the democratic theory with regard to Internet language. In other words, the absence of the visual or non-verbal aspects of communication does not necessarily mean the absence of a basis for discrimination. Unfortunately, cyberspace is not a utopia where real-life inequality does not exist. However, it could also be considered fortunate that the Internet is able to preserve the complexity of reality and thus enable us to transfer as much as possible from the real world to the virtual communities, for better or for worse.

5. Conclusion

The current study may be one of the first to investigate the perceptions of the younger Chinese generation regarding the feminine style of Internet language in China. The fact that the informants of the current study were from universities in the south of China means that the results cannot be taken as absolutely representative of the attitudes of students of their academic level over the country as a whole. However, both universities are national comprehensive universities that recruit students from all over China so the sample of 211 students can be considered as reasonably representative of this group of citizens as a whole. The results suggest positive attitudes overall towards the feminine style of Chinese Internet language among the younger generation in China. However, feminine features on the Internet are perceived negatively in terms of status, which is consistent with the attitudes towards women's language in face-to-face communication. The finding of gender stereotyping appears not to support the cyber democracy theory. Gender inequality is still clearly evident on the Internet, ranging from access to the Internet to attitudes towards the feminine style of Chinese Internet language. Future research is recommended to explore attitudes towards this style of Internet language from a broader perspective, including investigating regional differences in China and the perspectives of participants from different socio-economic backgrounds.

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