# Age, Culture, and Communication:
# Contextualization and Framing in a Playful Online Forum

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes frame shifting between playfulness and seriousness and contextualization cues in an extended playful thread in an online Chinese forum. This study takes culture as a necessary complement to computer-mediated discourse analysis, endeavoring to provide a perspective from which to analyze both the linguistic and social dimensions of online communication. CMC acts were classified as bona fide and non-bona fide communication, and categories of contextualization cues were identified. The findings show that in this online environment, frames and contextualization cues can be identified and play a significant role in determining the tone and the expected development of participants' messages. Specifically, contextualization cues help participants identify a certain frame of expected content, and the identified "playful" or "serious" frame directs participants to respond playfully or seriously. In this process, cultural nationality has a stronger effect than participant age.

## Keywords

Frame, contextualization cues, culture, age, online communication

## INTRODUCTION

As Castronova (2004) claims, "the virtual worlds now emerging on the Internet manifest themselves with two faces: one invoking fantasy and play, the other merely extending day-to-day existence into a more entertaining circumstance" (p.185). Characterized by autonomy and anonymity, the Internet entails a high degree of playfulness and relaxation. However, while immersed in the same entertaining environment, different users may show different orientations: Some may engage playfully, as if they are in a virtual wonderland, while others may respond seriously, as if they are still in the physical offline world. This juxtaposition is particularly salient in online forum discussions: Without face-to-face interaction and almost solely depending on typed text, which means lacking all the information conveyed by facial expression, body language, intonation, stress and laughter, why and how do some participants tend to be more playful, while others choose to be more serious? What elements cue their different activities as teasing, joking, or serious discussion?

With these concerns, the purpose of this paper is to examine these questions from a more "international" perspective, endeavoring to shed light on possible cultural impacts on online interactions. With this in mind, a thread in a playful online forum in China was chosen as the data for analysis. Internet technologies and sites of technology practice in China have undergone rapid transformation over the last 10 years. "Changes in access and control of online content have led to numerous debates over the social impact of Internet technology in China and the nation's image in a globalizing age" (Lindtner and Szablewicz, 2010). As an Asian country incorporating both tradition and transformation, China's online forums may provide a new and hopefully useful source of data to answer these questions, especially in contrast to the U.S. cultural context that dominates most Internet research.

This study builds on a theoretical foundation that incorporates concepts of "frame" (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993) and "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1992), as well as Bateson's (1972) research on play and fantasy. All participants' personal profiles in this forum were checked and divided into sub-groups to investigate possible impacts of microsocial factors, such as age, on their online communication. Computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) was used as the main method, according to which the CMC Act Taxonomy (Herring, Das and Penumarthy, 2005), especially the bona-fide and non-bona fide categories, was applied to demarcate potential frames of seriousness and playfulness. In addition, macrosocial factors, such as culture, were taken into account, as a necessary complement to linguistic discourse analysis, to answer questions about the participants' shifting between playfulness and seriousness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers (Bateson, 1972; Danet, 1998; Baym, 1995) have investigated relationships among playfulness, contextualization and frame, providing intriguing insights and developing theories of contextualization cues, frames and play. However, these theories tend to be insufficient in today's digital era: Some merely shed light on play and playfulness in general (Bateson, 1972). Some just focus on the contextualization and framing in face-to-face interaction and verbal language (Goffman, 1974; Gumperz, 1982; Tannen and Wallat, 1993). And some others investigate online communication as a unified phenomenon, while ignoring the impacts of different cultures and diverse languages (Baym , 1995; Danet, 1998).

In his essay *A theory of play and fantasy* (1972), Bateson suggests that the phenomenon of play can only occur "if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of metacommunication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message 'This is play'" (p.316). Thus, "every metacommunicative message is or defines a psychological frame" (P.323). Danet (1998) develops her theory of play from the perspective of computer-mediated communication. She proposes that by conventional criteria, playfulness in CMC can easily be viewed as threatening to the social order. Both Bateson and Danet regard play as a frame of unreality, and people need to exchange signals which carry meta-information to identify this frame.

Specifically, then, what are these signals and frames? Incorporating Goffman's (1981) notion of "footing", Tannen and Wallat (1993) propose the interactive notion of frame, which "refers to a sense of what activity is being engaged in, how speakers mean what they say" (p. 60). It is frame that contextualizes people's "speech activity" (Gumperz, 1982), provides expectations and assumptions which a listener/reader must know to correctly interpret an utterance and to continue the intended conversation, and directs participants to respond playfully or seriously, because they believe/expect they are in a "playful" or "serious" frame and they want to follow the guidelines/expectations. "Put simply, frames are like labels that we use to identify what we and our interlocutors are doing" (Straehle, 1993). They are "structures of expectations" (Ross, 1975) shaped by one's knowledge schema: Based on one's experience of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences (Tannen, 1993).

In addition, "people identify frames in interaction by association with linguistic and paralinguistic cues—the way words are uttered—in addition to what they say" (Tannen and Wallat, 1993, p.61). These cues are "contextualization cues" in Gumperz's term (1982). The notion of "contextualization cue" covers any verbal or nonverbal sign that helps speakers hint at, or clarify, and listeners to make "inferences"—mental processes that allow conversationalists to evoke the cultural background and social expectations necessary to interpret speech (p. 229). These cues may include "prosody", "paralinguistic signs", "code choice" and "choice of lexical forms/formulaic expressions" (p. 231).

Although insightful, these theories turn out to be problematic, especially in today's digital age. A primary problem is that they all focus on verbal signs and regard nonverbal signs as merely "body language": Gestures, postures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc. As Hymes (1986) notes, in face-to-face interaction, people use "a wink, gesture, posture, style of dress, musical accompaniment … English aspiration and vowel length" (p. 62) as cues to identify a frame. Nevertheless, none of them can be observed in online communication, which is mainly text-based communication without vocal or physical signs.

Furthermore, these theories tend to treat communication as a unified phenomenon while ignoring the impacts of various cultures and diverse languages. Is it possible that different cultures, in addition to personal knowledge schemas, can impact people's interpretations of contextualization cues and identifications of frames? Is it possible that people raised in an Eastern culture, e.g. Chinese culture, are more likely to act serious even in a playful online forum than Western people? Some researchers have noticed the conflicts between traditional culture and new technologies in China. On the one hand, powers of traditional culture are still strong in China: Confucianism is undisputedly the most influential thought, which forms the foundation of the Chinese cultural tradition and still provides the basis for the norms of Chinese interpersonal behavior (Pye, 1972). This unique culture shapes Chinese people's basic identity and "underlies social interaction among the ordinary Chinese people" (Fan, 2000, p.4). They feel ashamed to show strong emotions in public and tend to mobilize their thoughts and actions to conform to social reality rather than making reality conform to them (Fan, 2000). On the other hand, Chinese culture is confronting challenges from modern technologies, especially Internet technologies. Fan (2000) proposes that "China has changed over the past 20 years and is still changing. So are the nation's cultural values. Economic reforms and opening doors to the west have not only changed the social landscape, but also reshaped the value system" (p. 4) Focusing on online games, Lindtner and Szablewicz (2010) suggest a notion of "multiple Internets", indicating that Internet technologies shape and are shaped by diverse forms of participation, values and interests. From a political perspective, Yang (2003) proposes that "Internet has shaped social organizations by expanding old principles of association, facilitating the activities of existing organizations and creating a new associational form, the virtual community" (p. 453). In particular, he points out the role of online forums, especially bulletin boards, in shaping public spheres: Online "publics" have proliferated along with online forums. Online publics tend to form around

forums of different thematic categories, such as leisure and entertainment, romance, sports, science and technology, education, economy, art and literature, politics, news, and the like. Unfortunately, little research has been done, especially from a cultural and linguistic perspective, to study relationships among playfulness, contextualization and frame in China's online forums.

**METHODOLOGY**

A thread of messages posted on the online forum "Tianya" in China was chosen as the data sample. "Tianya" means "a far away corner of the world". This forum is the most popular, open, and conflictual but also playful forum in China. This thread of messages includes an original message in which a so-called "coal boss" in Shanxi Province, China, who is very rich, claims that he is seeking a live-in  son-in-law[1] for his only daughter, along with numerous following comments. Shanxi province is a relatively poor region in China. However, it is famous for its rich coal resources, and all the businessmen doing coal business there are extremely rich (It is said that they constitute the richest group in China.) They are called "coal bosses" by most Chinese. This is a term for those people who are very rich but have received little education. This original message was posted at 1:03 am, October 16, 2008 and it still receives new comments now. It has been viewed 804,137 times and has 14,566 comments so far. This thread of messages was posted in the "Tianya" online forum in China. The URL of this thread is: http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1443024.s html.

According to the categories presented in Herring (2004), this data sample was selected by theme (all messages in a particular thread) and by time (the first 200 posted messages). All 200 messages were posted during 9 hours (1:03 am to 10:12 am, October 16, 2008). In the first 1.6 hours, 100 messages were posted: The activity level was very high--around 1 message per minute—especially considering the particular time period—midnight. After that, this level slowed down: In the next 7 hours, only 100 messages were posted, around 0.3 messages per minute. A simple reason is that most Internet users were sleeping during this period. However, this active level is still much higher than for many other forums in China: Some forums (e.g. a famous English learning forum) only have 100 messages posted in six months. All participants in this thread are Chinese. Most of them report themselves as "male" and 20 to 40 years old. They can be considered to be experienced with online interaction and forum posting.

Based on this sample, the following research questions were posed:

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1   "Live-in son-in-law" is a different term from "househusband". It means a husband who lives in his wife's house with his in-laws. Usually, he has to abide by his father-in-law. This situation is relatively unusual in China, a still male-dominated society. A man tends to feel ashamed if he has to depend on his wife's family and be controlled by his father-in-law in any sense.

*1)    Do some participants tend to be more playful, while others choose to be more serious, even in a same thread?*
*2)    If yes, what elements cue their different attitudes as playfulness or seriousness?*
*3)    Is there evidence that culture, in addition to personal background, impacts participants' decisions to be playful or serious in this thread, and if so, how?*

In order to address these questions, computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) was used in this study. All participants' personal profiles in this forum were checked and divided into sub-groups by age to investigate possible impacts of personal backgrounds and Chinese culture on their online communication. The CMC Act Taxonomy (Herring, Das and Penumarthy, 2005), especially the meta-act categories of bona fide and non-bona fide communication, was used to identify potential frames of seriousness and playfulness. According to this scheme, from the first posted message, each utterance was assigned a unique identifier, such as *1, 5b, 40c*, etc. However, if several utterances were consecutive, inter-related and talk about a similar topic, they were coded as only one CMC act with one identifier. For example, as a response to the original message with a requirement for providing a brief self-introduction, a participant posted, "Age: 24. Height: 173 (bare feet) Degree: Technical school." This message was coded as "72a: bona fide", which means it is a single bona fide CMC act even though it includes three different kinds of topical information (age, height and degree).

In general, the steps in the analytical procedure can be described as follows:
1)    **Coding**
 This step included CMC act Taxonomy (Herring, Das and Penumarthy, 2005) coding and interrater reliability assessment. The first 60 messages were co-coded with Susan Herring.
2)    **Identification of frame shifts**
 Based on the coding in 1), a frame shift from seriousness to playfulness was defined as a non-bona fide response to a previous bona fide message, while a frame shift from playfulness to seriousness was defined as a bona fide response to a previous non-bona fide message. Importantly, because the original message showed a serious tone, the "default frame" of this thread is seriousness, although the topic is playful.
3)    **Matching**
 This identified contextualization cues in the "triggering" CMC acts based on an incorporation of Gumperz's (1992) qualitative approach and the linguistic analysis of the cultural implications and rhetorical features of the Chinese texts. For example:
*31a: In ancient China, people conducted martial arts competitions to win a wife. Now people search for a son in a law online.(non-bona fide)*
*193a: Now we are not in ancient China. In ancient China,*

*there may be some noble and kind young men who marry girls from rich families. but they should really fall in love with each other first. (bona-fide)*

193a responds to 31a, so they constitute a "match". 31a is the triggering CMC act while 193a is the triggered one, which realizes a frame shift from playfulness to seriousness. Considering the two acts together, a contextualization cue can be identified: a cultural reference to "ancient China".

The expectations for the outcomes of the analysis were articulated as the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** *Different participants will choose to respond playfully or seriously, even in the same thread.*
**Hypothesis 2:** *Different participants will choose to respond playfully or seriously based on cues they interpret from messages that they respond to.*
**Hypothesis 3:** *Culture can be considered an accumulating phenomenon over time, thus the older a Chinese participant is, the more likely he or she will affected by Chinese culture and respond seriously.*

## RESULTS

### General and sub-group measures

The sample contains 494 CMC acts in 200 messages. These acts were broken into three sub-groups based on age: 20-29, 30-40, and age unknown. Gender as a variable was omitted from this study because only 20 CMC acts were posted by "female", or reported "female" participants, accounting for 4% of the whole sample. One possible reason for so many male participants may be that males are more appropriate and qualified to respond than females, considering the topic of the original message. It is also possible that some reported "male" participants are female, in fact. They just pretend to be male to respond. However, considering the time-consuming effort required to construct one's online identity and reputation in this forum, and most participants responded by using their main ID (can be confirmed by checking their registration date and list of posts in the personal profile), participants may not risk ruining their reputation in this forum to pretend. Table 1 shows the distributions of messages and CMC acts in these sub-groups.

| Age | Messages | | CMC acts | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| 20-29 | 97 | 49% | 219 | 44% |
| 30-39 | 28 | 14% | 69 | 14% |
| Unknown | 75 | 37% | 206 | 42% |
| **Total** | **200** | **100%** | **494** | **100%** |

**Table 1. Distributions of messages and CMC acts by age**

Results show that 44% of the CMC acts were posted by 20 to 29 year old people and 14% by 30 to 40 year old people. 42% of the CMC acts were posted by age-unknown people. As it is difficult to determine the personalities or backgrounds of the age unknown group, this paper focuses on the two age-known groups.

### Identification of possible frame shifts

Table 2 shows the distribution of non-bona fide and bona fide CMC acts. Based on manually coding correspondences between non-bona fide and bona fide CMC acts, in all 494 CMC acts, 128 CMC acts were identified as frame shifting (Table 3). Other CMC acts were considered to remain in the default frame of seriousness, accounting for the majority of this sample: 74%.

| Categories | CMC acts | |
|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percent |
| Non-bona fide | 79 | 16% |
| Bona fide | 415 | 84% |
| **Total** | **494** | **100%** |

**Table 2. The distribution of non-bona fide and bona fide CMC acts**

| | CMC acts | |
|---|---|---|
| Categories | Number | Percent |
| Seriousness to Playfulness | 79 | 16% |
| Playfulness to Seriousness | 49 | 10% |
| Remain in Seriousness | 366 | 74% |
| **Total** | **494** | **100%** |

**Table 3. Identified frame shifting**

### Categories of contextualization cues

Through an incorporation of Gumperz's (1992) qualitative approach and the linguistic analysis of the cultural implications and rhetorical features of the Chinese texts, categories of contextualization cues that help participants identify frames are described in Table 6. Here I discuss four main categories of contextualization cues that occurred in my sample: semantic, syntactic, paralinguistic and combined.

*Semantic cues: including exaggeration, references and inferences or puns.*

#### 1.1.1.1 Exaggeration

Two kinds of exaggeration were found: negative and positive. For example:

*82b: Skills: World class achievements throughout various disciplines. You can find the records of my achievements in the US Congress Library.*

This is a positive exaggeration (boast) and indicates a frame of playfulness. Thus 106a was triggered and provided similar boast:

*106a: Can't you see: I have such an unprecedented talent, which can fill up the gap of millions of years in human history? ... Such a handsome guy is the incorporation of all essences in the world. You can just admire him from far away but never can touch him.*

Also, there is negative exaggeration:

*53a: This post shows the No.1 cheater of the whole world!*

This is a bona fide message with strong emotion. It indicates a frame of seriousness and triggers a series of serious discussions, or arguments, about the personalities of the original poster and of the poster of 53a:

*The original poster   56a: Set you as an example of loser. You are the frog in the well that knows nothing of the great ocean. You call everything beyond your shallow version "cheating".*

*The 53a poster    67a: Your words just prove that you are just a person who likes to make personal and arbitrary judgments!*

### 1.1.1.2    References

References play the most important role among the semantic cues. Personalized interpretations of a reference in a single context, or in various contexts, may lead to different responses. The following categories of references used in this sample were identified: political, sexual, cultural, educational, economical and nominal.

### 1.1.1.2.1    *Political reference*

*17a: Don't behave as though you can always post faster than me because now you are a member of the Communist Party of China.*

This poster is joking with a previous poster (12a), complaining that the 12a poster can always submit his message faster because he is a member of the Communist Party of China. This is a political, and in some sense satiric reference in China, referring to a powerful and privileged person. This reference provides a hint of playfulness and triggers following playful messages, such as *"50a: One sentence to describe myself: I'm a member of Chinese Communist Party".*

### 1.1.1.2.2    *Sexual reference*

*94a: Your daughter is not a virgin.*

This poster is deriding the coal boss' daughter, indicating that she is not a virgin so she cannot find a good husband and has to search for him online in such a weird way. This is a sexual reference because in China, especially in ancient China, if a woman has had sex before her marriage, she would be regarded as dirty and immoral.

Including this reference, 94a triggers both playful and serious message:

*109a: I want to ask whether or not your daughter is a virgin? (Playfulness)*

*111a: Your thoughts are so dirty. (Seriousness)*

There is a frame shift from playfulness (94a) to seriousness (111a).

### 1.1.1.2.3    *Cultural reference*

*31: In ancient China, people conducted martial arts competitions to win a wife. Now people search for a son in law online. Nothing is impossible in this strange world!!!!!!!*

"Martial arts competition to win a wife" is a cultural reference originating from ancient China, meaning a man holds a competition in public to find a son-in-law: All competitors will use martial arts (or "kungfu") to fight with each other one by one, and the last winner will get the daughter as his wife. Thus, this reference implies a "ridiculous" competition in public for a pretty girl and triggers a series of playful messages:

*39a: My darling, get up to watch a martial arts competition to win a wife*

*55a: Competing martial arts to become the husband of a coal girl.*

### 1.1.1.2.4    *Educational reference*

*3a: A fake college student passes by.*

*27a: This is a primary school student passing by…*

*36a: This is a person who only has high school "degree" running away with tears…*

Chinese people have a long history of valuing education and literacy. A higher education level and degree usually indicate higher income and social status in China. Thus, once a certain poster describes himself as a "fake college student", other posters take the hint and post messages such as "a primary school student" and "only has high school degree" to tease, since parents always hope their daughter will marry an excellent husband who has enough money and high social status to give her a good life.

### 1.1.1.2.5    *Economical reference*

*1: I am one of those "coal bosses" called by most Chinese…I hope my future live-in son-in-law can work in my company and take over my business when I'm too old..*

*151a: A coal boss is recruiting workers!*

*155a: Landlord, I think you want to find a guy majoring in baby-sitting?*

*168c: P.S. It seems that Uncle landlord wants to find someone who can help your business. And he also needs to help you have your offspring*

The original poster provides several economical references, such as "coal boss" and "live-in son-in-law" in his message. "Coal boss" in China implies richness and "live-in son-in-law" means economically dependence on the wife's family, especially on the father-in-law. These references trigger following messages playfully discussing the economic status of a live-in son-in-law and his potential relationship with the father-in-law.

*1.1.1.2.6 Nominal reference*

*57a: I respond because I want to give face to 飞鸡.*

"飞鸡" (A flying chicken in English) is a famous user ID in this forum because he posted many humorous posts before, and his ID is associated with "fun". Thus, mentioning this ID provides a hint of "playfulness", such as:

*148a: I strongly recommend Brother and Chinese Party member 飞鸡! He is the best, my landlord! You cannot find anyone better than him!*

**1.1.1.3    Inferences or puns**

Inferences provide hints to identify a frame. For example, the original poster submitted:

*62c: This is the last thing I can do for her.*

He is serious and sad because his daughter will start a new life without him: She will be supported more by her husband than by her father. This is what he means by "the last thing I can do for her".

However, a following poster made an absurd inference, indicating a frame shift from seriousness to playfulness.

*74a: Are you going to die very soon?*

Puns can provide similar clues. An example is the famous ID "飞鸡" (A flying chicken in English).

*12a:...One sentence to describe myself: I'm a fighter aircraft in all aircraft.*

Here 12a uses a pun because the pronunciation of "aircraft" is the same as that of "a flying chicken" in Chinese, making his self-introduction very humorous. This pun cues a frame of playfulness and triggers some similar messages such as:

*66c: One sentence: If this forum is a garbage dump, I'm not a fighter aircraft in all the garbage in any sense.*

*Syntactic cues: including re-constructed terms, repetitive/similar sentence patterns, and punctuation*

**1.1.1.4    Re-constructed terms**

As the original poster provides a term "coal boss" in his message, some following posters reconstruct this term as "coal-" or "-boss" to show their satire. For example:

*55a: Competing martial arts to become the husband of a coal girl*

*88c: This is the support from a "construction boss".*

*146: How about you organize a challenge tournament and broadcast it on live? The title should be "coal marriage"!*

This syntactic feature of re-constructed terms shows a strong sense of satire and a frame shift from the original poster's "seriousness" to the following "playfulness".

**1.1.1.5    Repetitive/similar sentence patterns**

Similar to re-constructed terms, repetitive/similar sentence patterns also show a strong flavor of satire and are used for teasing. For example, the original poster submitted:

*33: I don't mind searching for a son in law online publicly. Why do you mind posting publicly?*

His tone is very serious but a following poster responded as:

*65: I don't mind being your live-in son in law. Why do you mind my degree?*

His use of similar sentence pattern here shows a frame shift from seriousness to playfulness.

**1.1.1.6    Punctuation**

Corpus analysis has shown that about 75% of Chinese sentences are composed of more than two sentence segments separated by commas or semicolons (Chen, 1994). Thus, punctuation marks play a crucial role in Chinese written language, and the use of punctuation can provide syntactic cues. For example, a poster submitted:

*5: 173 cm tall. An unqualified person passes by。。。*

The original poster responded:

*9: You typed "。。。" for "…". I don't think you will be a good husband because of your carelessness.*

His critique shows a frame shift from playfulness to seriousness. Then another poster submitted:

*167: I'm using standard suspension points of "……". You can count to check whether or not there are 6 points.*

The strong flavor of satire about punctuation here leads to a frame shift from seriousness to playfulness.

*Paralinguistic cues: including behavioral words*

Gumperz (1982) regards "paralinguistic signs" (p. 231) -- features of communication that takes place without the use of grammar and vocabulary (e.g. tone of voice, gesture, posture) as a kind of contextualization cue. In textual computer-mediated communication, due to the absence of body, these cues have changed: behavioral words instead of physical behaviors (gesture and posture), facial signs (emoticons) instead of facial expression, and so forth. Many

| Frame | 20-29 | | 30-39 | | Unknown | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| S→P | 37 | 17% | 12 | 17% | 30 | 15% |
| P→S | 23 | 11% | 16 | 23% | 10 | 5% |
| Remain in S | 159 | 72% | 47 | 60% | 166 | 80% |
| **Total** | **219** | **100%** | **69** | **100%** | **206** | **100%** |

behavioral words are observed in this sample as paralinguistic cues, for example:

*3a: A fake college student passes by.*

*108b: I'm a person with a master's degree flying away this post.*

*195b: One sentence to describe myself: I just come here to buy soy sauce.[2]*

All these behavioral words indicate a frame of playfulness and trigger similar messages that follow.

### Combination

The categories of contextualization cues discussed above are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they complement one another. Thus, usually a message will provide two or more kinds of cues in combination. For example, the educational reference and the paralinguistic cue (behavioral words) are used together frequently in the sample:

*27a: This is a primary school student passing by…*

*41: I just have a primary school "degree". I cannot take this beauty but at least I can leave my mark here.*

In general, various contextualization cues can help people identify frames. At the same time, different personal interpretations of these cues can engender various responses in line with the "identified" frames: Some cues are identified by almost all posters as signs of a serious frame or a playful frame, thus they only trigger serious or playful messages. Some other cues are identified by a certain poster as signs of seriousness but by another poster as signs of playfulness. Thus they trigger both serious and playful messages, showing frame shifts between seriousness and playfulness.

### Distribution of frame shifting in sub-groups

Distributions of frame shifts differ among the different age-based sub-groups: 20-29, 30-40, and unknown. As mentioned above, this study focused on the age known groups to avoid arbitrary inferences as much as possible. Considering that there are more messages from some age groups than from other(s), table 4 shows the distribution of

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[2] "Buy soy sauce" is a very popular online idiom in China, meaning "just pass by and do nothing".

frame shifts in the sub-groups relative to the number of CMC acts for each group.

**Table 4: Distribution of frame shifting in sub-groups relative to the number of CMC acts for each sub-group. (S: seriousness. P: playfulness)**

These results show that younger and age unknown people are more likely to stay in the frame of seriousness (72% and 80% respectively) than people in their 30s (60%).

## DISCUSSION

The results of my analysis suggest support for both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. More generally, the results confirm previous findings on the roles of "frame" (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993) and "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1982) in discourse: Even in the online forum thread, which lacks face-to-face interaction and almost solely depends on typed text, frames and contextualization cues can be identified and play a significant role in guiding the tone and the expected development of participants' discussions. However, hypothesis 3 is not supported, given the unexpected results in Table 4. Here I define "most" as more than 50% of all participants and set the confidence level $\alpha = 0.05$. Thus I have $H_0$: P>50% v.s. $H_1$: P ≤ 50%. Statistical analysis shows that for age group 20-29, p= 0.7260274 > 0.05, and for age 30-39, p= 0.6811594 >0.05, which means that statistic significance exists between age and frame shifts, therefore, $H_0$ should be accepted. That is, although the 20-29 group favors S→P (17% vs. 11%) while the 30-39 group slightly favors P→S (23% vs. 17%), most of the Chinese participants, no matter how old, act seriously rather than shifting between seriousness and playfulness in this thread. This is consistent with behavior in Chinese culture as a whole. Thus culture may help to explain this phenomenon.

With their different cultural tradition from Western countries, Chinese people may tend to be situation-centered, serious and introverted in their everyday social interaction, whereas Westerners may tend to be more person-centered, relaxed, casual, humorous, and extroverted (Hall, 1998; Hsu, 1981; Marsella, 1985). This cultural tradition has roots in four thousand years of history, and it is maintained and inherited through language. Its continuity and depth give it strength and great impact on shaping the culture of Chinese nationals. In this sense, even though the Internet provides an anonymous and open digital environment with a high degree of freedom, many Chinese people still tend to be as serious as they are in the offline world, even when engaging in an entertaining environment. In this respect, macrosocial elements—e.g. cultural tradition and social norms—appear to have a greater influence than age, a microsocial element, on interpreting contextualization cues and identifying frame shifting in this case.

Therefore, in regards to my study of this thread, I propose a model of frame shifting as shown in Figure 1. When posters

read a message that includes potential contextualization cues, it becomes a "triggering message". Different personal interpretations of the same contextualization cues identify the triggering message as belonging in different frames: serious or playful. In this cognitive process, macrosocial elements (e.g. cultural nationality in this case) have a stronger effect than age, a microsocial element in this case. Based on a certain frame, posters then submit responses that they consider to best fit that frame. These messages are "triggered messages", which become potential "triggering messages" in turn. However, this would not be warranted as a general model for all cases of online communication, because it is only based on my single small study.
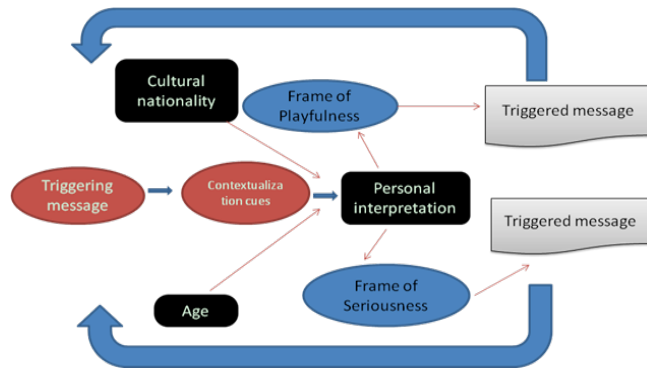


**Figure 1. Model of frame shifting in this study**

## CONCLUSION

With the goal of investigating reasons for Internet users' different activities in a single environment, this paper analyzed the frame shifting between playfulness and seriousness and the contextualization cues that signaled those shifts within a playful thread in an online Chinese forum. In contrast to existing theories that focus mainly on linguistic analysis, this study took macrosocial factors—e.g. cultural, social and traditional influences—into account in an attempt to provide a plausible analysis of online communication from both linguistic and social perspectives in a cultural context which is different from that of the U.S.

The conclusions are limited by the small size and unbalanced sub-group distributions of the sample data. In an expanded study, the effects of other microsocial variables and the original poster's participation should also be taken into account. Further research is required to confirm findings by analyzing more microsocial elements other than age, creating more than two age ranges (i.e. break the participants into 4 or 5 year ranges), and investigating any other potentially influencing variables in other Chinese discussion forums. Moreover, the role of culture and tradition in shaping Internet users' default frames can only be inferred from analyzing only one kind of culture; online discussions hosted in different countries with diverse cultures should be analyzed to compare.

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