

The Presentation of Self on Online Social Network Platforms from the Perspective of Dramaturgical Theory

Taking WeChat Moments and Anonymous Question Platform "Tape" as Examples

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the underlying relation between Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and people's self-presentation on online social networking platforms. Erving Goffman suggested that people "perform" in accordance with their social environment and desirable image in social life, like "actors" perform on "stages". The technological development and emergence of online social networking changed the traditional mode of communication. Therefore, people's behavior on the online "stage" is considered to be distinct from face-to-face communication. This study presents the basic idea of dramaturgical theory. It uses WeChat "Moments" and anonymous question box "Tape" as two contrastive cases to demonstrate how people present themselves on real-name stage and anonymous stage in the context of Goffman. The conclusion shows that people's behavior on a real-name online platform is more like an offline stage because they are still restricted by their expected norms and audiences' attitudes. The anonymous stage enables users to present personal characteristics and sentimental expressions because of the anonymity.

Keywords: Erving Goffman, dramaturgical theory, online social networking, self-presentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory suggested that people "perform" in accordance with their social environment and desirable image in social life, like "actors" perform on "stages". In the 21st century, the technological development and emergence of online social networking platforms present new applications of this theory. WeChat is one of the most prevalent social networking software in China. Besides the basic dialog function, its "Moments" is a multi-functional platform where sharing and exchanging opinions with friends in lists are not restricted by distance and time. Another typical case is Tape,

In contrast to "Moments", its main function, the "anonymous question box," provides a platform on

which questioners can ask anything in the question box without the box owners finding out who they actually are. Such a mechanism allows questioners to break social norms and ask from random thoughts to private life under cover of anonymity.

This study will investigate how people perform on these two contrastive stages from the perspective of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In the first part of this study, the theoretical findings from existing literature will be addressed. In the second part, the methodology and discussion towards the aim of this study will be presented. The last part is the conclusion of this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *A Review of Goffman's dramaturgical theory*

Erving Goffman introduced a conceptualization of identity construction in the study of human interaction using borrowed dramaturgical metaphors. In this theory, he uses "perform" to describe how people behave in accordance with their social environment so that they'd project a desirable image. Every individual can be seen as an actor with the social setting where the audience sees them as the front stage, and when the actors retreat to the back stage where there is no observing audience, they will act differently.

In Goffman's opinion, people don't actually change their personality through times during the wide range of performances in everyday social life. On the contrary, they put on "masks" on top of their inner self as a means for deception in face-to-face interaction [1].

In the late 20th century, Goffman saw the technology developments as facilities of 'interaction order', a notion he adopted for the entire face-to-face interaction domain. New communication methods such as phone calls give people breakaways from the norm, yet they are inferior and marginal means of interaction [2, 3].

2.2. *WeChat "Moments" under the perspective of dramaturgical theory*

2.2.1. *Self-presentation and interaction on online social platforms like Moments and their relations with participants' off-line impressions and interpersonal relationships*

Yang, Zhang, and Feng said about the role-playing of the college students on Moments that, different from the fixed role-playing in real life, college students kept the freedom to play any role they like in the virtual space to obtain self-satisfaction and improve the effect of self-presentation through others' evaluation. Although the self-presentation behavior of college students on Moments widened the social scope and clarified the social expectations, it might lead the young users into the dilemma of role confusion [4].

Bullingham and Vasconcelos suggested that while applying Goffman's original theoretical framework for understanding interaction and self-presentation in the online world, it was also important to note the enhanced self-editing potential of the online environment, thereby exploring the boundaries and gray areas between persona adoption and more overt self-editing [5].

Li and Zhu studied the self-presentation of college students users on WeChat. They offered the viewpoints

that the self-presentation of young college students on Moments was complicated. They regarded it as a tool to improve the real social, interpersonal relationship and relieve psychological emotions. They regarded it as a stage for self-expression and personality display at the same time [6].

2.2.2. *Stage setting of Moments as the front stage and its influence*

Fang came up with three points of view about the stage setting of Moments as the front stage.

a. The self-presentation behavior on online social platforms like Moments could transcend time and space, be preserved, and keep great subjective control.

b. According to the "presence effect" in psychology, the presence of real acquaintances on Moments could both promote and inhibit personal self-presentation.

c. The "circle" structure of Moments returned the privacy of online social intercourse, and the closure of social information brought more sense of belonging to stimulate users' enthusiasm for online social intercourse [7].

Birnbaum and Gardner studied the self-presentation of college students on Facebook. They argued that Goffman believed that humans were first and foremost social, and we learned about ourselves and the world through social interactions. We had developed sophisticated ways to engage in those interactions. Facebook represented a change in degree, not a change in nature. It gives college students new ways to perform these actions and allows them to easily exercise more personalized control over their impressions [8].

2.3. *New transitions brought by anonymous question platform*

Yang discussed why the online "anonymous question box" had become the new social favorite among young people. She suggested that aside from its ability to unleash curiosity and open communication, the popularity of anonymous question boxes stemmed largely from their "safe distance" properties, which solved one of the biggest social perplexities among young people today: social phobia. The safety of social distancing through anonymity had rekindled young people's desire for honest communication [9].

Birnholtz, Merola, and Paul had done a case study analysis of question-asking on Facebook confession boards (FCBs), a tool popular in some college campuses. Their results showed users asking about taboo and stigmatized topics with local others and receiving relevant responses with little cyberbullying or negativity, which meant it was a reasonable way to leverage the

benefits of anonymity without suffering its drawbacks [10].

3. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In Goffman's opinion, people don't actually change their personality through times during the wide range of performances in everyday social life. On the contrary, they put on "masks" on top of their inner self as a means for deception in face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1990). He uses "perform" to describe how people behave in accordance with their social environment so that they'd project a desirable image. With this kind of ever-adjusting performance, every individual can be seen as an actor with the social setting where the audience sees them as the front stage. At this stage, characters are conscious of being observed by the audience and will perform based on social norms that apply to specific situations. And when the actors retreat to the back stage where there is no observing audience, they will act differently. Therefore, the real name and anonymity stage have fundamental impacts on people's choices of self-presentation.

Epistemologically this study takes on an interpretivism approach to compare and explain how people present themselves on real-name and anonymous stages in the context of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. A qualitative method will be adopted, and cases of WeChat and Tape will be used to analyze.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 the presentation of self in WeChat's Moments

In Moments, compared with offline communication, the outputting person (leading character) has stronger initiative, and the inputting crowd can obtain sufficient information, i.e., the function of sharing has been strengthened. Through the span of time and space, as well as the extension of memory, sharing has become more profound, closer to a planned record with an autobiographical aspect that can be seen as a combination of interactive performance and recorded presentation, the main character, as a director, has to arrange the instant stage effect as well as all posts chronically as a whole to assist their own impression management in acquaintances socialization.

The main characters always have the power of what to post on their stage, and they can choose their audience group to an extent by sectionalizing their friends with tags. However, they can't control the interactions in the comment section directly because they can't delete comments from others or further prescribe a limit to the audience of the comments. Therefore, as Abercrombie and Longhurst's Incorporation/resistance Paradigm describes it, the main

characters are also pressured and restrained with the audience's power to view and criticize the posted content [11].

Under every post, WeChat has a friends-based interaction mechanism: if A is WeChat friends with B and C respectively, then only if B and C are WeChat friends with each other can they see each other's likes and comments under A's share; conversely, if B and C are not WeChat friends, they cannot see each other under the post. Besides, after users like content, they'll be notified about the interaction between other friends under this mutual friend's post.

Normally speaking, such interactions would center on the post and the leading character. Therefore this particular circle of friends functions as a supporting team during the performance.

In Moments, performers can control the "visibility" of the shared information by setting a time range for the open access of their posts, which makes the posts may go from live performance to an exhibition to people in a certain range.

Due to such constant publicity in an acquaintances circle, performance on Moments needs to meet the standard on eligible presentation of self in general. It may consist of highlights in daily life, opinions on social events and artistic works, connection with others, etc. It also needs to consider this particular set of the audience by referencing largely to their daily social norm in face-to-face communication. The taboo topics such as personal secrets, certain family or relationship situations are still not allowed in front of the stage curtain, and performers would be even more cautious about the themes and choice of words since the content on Moments can be easily screenshotted by the audience.

Another distinctive characteristic of Moments is the ever-shifting relationship between stage and audience. As mentioned afore, what the audience sees on every stage (post) is partly determined by how big and active their mutual friends' group is with the person who posts it. Thus, we can see the post as a stage with multiple sections, except the main character. The audience (also potential actors) can see only part of what's going on, creating more trouble for the main character to control the performance process.

4.2 the presentation of self in anonymous question box Tape

The performance on the question box involves a social group, but the spotlight is entirely on the box owner. As the only leading character, the owners are motivated by a strong desire to represent their best, which is satisfied by their power of question selection.

According to a survey conducted by Shuyu in 2020, 72.4% of Tape question box owners hope to be asked

about their personal status, which is the most popular kind of questions, followed by “daily troubles”, “confession of secret”, “relationship counselling” and “love declaration”, all welcomed by more than 50% of the box owners participating in the survey [12].

The main reason behind this willingness is the owner’s control over the front stage. People’s fear of revealing personal information, according to Serpa and Ferreira[13], is mainly about losing control of their front stage so that the audience would see through the curtain and discover what’s on backstage, which may take on a different look from the performance or even sabotage the foundation of character. However, with owners acting as administrators with absolute control over this particular front stage, no information can go to the public without their consent. Personal information no longer represents the potential risk of exposing privacy but only materials that can enrich their personality during the on-stage performance. Birnholtz, Morola also confirm such a positive outcome, and Paul’s study on Facebook confession boards [10] suggests that fewer negative responses are received on stigmatized topics with anonymity.

As the source of questions that form up the whole stage setting on the question box, the questioners, though anonymous, play the character just as important as the box owners. Combining the understanding of both box owners and questioners, their motivations can be categorized into three types:

4.2.1. prier

Priers ask privacy-violating questions, to which some box owners would simply ignore them so that they can protect their privacy and avoid potential conflicts with the questioner. In contrast, some would prefer to state their feelings to the questioners with a directed answer so that the negative feedback won’t be known to others, yet it would be received. Moreover, box owners would like to use these questions as their material to show certain characters or attitudes with a whimsical or serious response.

4.2.2. assistant

Contrary to priers, assistants ask personal questions about the box owners that they are willing to answer so that their material can directly be used as an ideal perspective to enrich the image of box owners. Generally, assistants tend to focus their questions on the fields that owners feel comfortable and confident to talk about. For most box owners, assistants are the ideal type of supporting characters team, for they cater to their needs of leaving a perfectly structured impression on the audience with the pleasant topic and direct connection to the “self” of box owners.

4.2.3. journalist

They come with questions regarding their own thoughts ranging from the academic analysis of a social phenomenon to a random life observation. They may not directly reflect the personality of the box owners. However, with a proper or creative answer, they can contribute to a fuller character image.

4.3 a comparison of performances on Moments and Tape

The performances on both platforms are largely based on the acquaintances of the main character (post sender or box owner), which forms up the acting team and audience of the stage. Moments is actually a major tunnel for box owners to share their question box link and get questions. Therefore, despite the respective distinctions of these two platforms, they still show similarity in their performance norm in certain aspects.

According to Baker’s definition of ‘blended identity’, the online self re-informs the offline self in further interaction with those the individual first met online to maintain their social impression performance in real life [14]. For the same set of audiences, performers naturally develop performances consistent with one another, creating a stable online identity. The online stage, under such interpretation, can be seen as a stage as a whole, with offline interactions as backstage providing fundamental information. With anonymity or not, online performances eventually contribute to the mask of social media image.

In this case particularly, Tape, with its special setting, is an auxiliary stage to Moments since it can hardly build an independent online social environment without the entrance on mainstream social applications. They both demonstrate the thoughts and lifestyle of the main character and secure their social bond with acquaintances. Generally speaking, Moments dedicates to a more official and formal presentation of self with more complicated team performance. In contrast, Tape focuses more on the presentation of individual characteristics and sentimental expressions. Combining the two performances, the main character presents itself a multi-dimensional role with adaption to online social etiquette, and memorable personalized portray to emphasize the main character as a real vivid person on the offline stage.

However, the influences of specific stage requirements such as anonymity and management power bring differences to performance on Moments and Tape.

In comparison to Tape, Moments resembles the offline stage, which set up more formal and strict performance norms with more social pressure. Bullingham believes that closely related to societal

pressure is the need to conform or 'fit in'[5]. On Moments, the presentation of the team is a backbone to put the performance together. Topics are brought forward with posts that function as a presentation of self-image and an introduction to further interactions. After such an introduction, the power of directing and controlling expands from the post sender to every performer in the comment section, even though the degree of power may differ. This dispersion of power brings more uncertainties into the development of plots. It therefore requires the performers to regulate their parts with more obedience to social etiquette so that the performance won't break down with displaying private questions or heated argument in front of acquaintances. It may mean losing their faces and jeopardizing their established offline self-image in front of an audience.

Tape anonymous question box provides its box owners a chance to build their perfect front stage setting to have a well-managed impression on the audience. The popularity of the anonymous question box is largely due to the distance it builds through "anonymity", which reduces the cost of frank communication and creates additional social opportunities with low risk. At the moment, young people are more cautious about effective communication on social front stages with the real-name regulation system such as Moments. Much like an online confessional that divides the questioner and box owner, the 'anonymous' intermediary steps provide a more secure environment for personal questions, which to a certain extent reflects the scope of an overly wide front stage on mainstream online platforms. Participants are not confident enough in their presentation of self, and the trust between actors and audience is weaker as an outcome of decreasing mutual understanding, and the rebroadcasts of performance. During this process, participants function in certain roles on this virtual front stage so that a selected creative and colorful performance about the box owner can be brought forth. Nevertheless, behind this anonymity-directed performance, we can still see the general social expectations and rules in presenting oneself.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the analysis of self-presentation on real-name stage WeChat "Moment" and anonymous stage "Tape", Goffman's dramaturgical theory suggested that people perform as "actors" on the front stage corresponding to their expected social norms. Though this opinion is based on offline social communication, it is still applicable to online social networking. In the case of the real-name stage "Moment", although the basic mode is no longer face-to-face, users are still pressured and restrained by the audience's power to views and criticize the posted content. In contrast, the anonymous stage "Tape" has

fewer limitations than offline communication due to its characteristic of anonymity. Questioners are not limited by their expected social norms and are likely to ask questions about personal status. While the box owner controls this stage, they can just ignore privacy-violating questions to avoid conflicts. In addition, box owners have options to give answers in accord with their expected social norms. By comparing how people perform in the real-name stage and anonymous stage, we can conclude that anonymity empowers users to present personal characteristics and sentimental expressions. The moment is relatively closer to offline communication in which users' behavior is confined by formal and restrict performance norms.

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