



Research on the Performance Framework and Interaction Ritual in Live Commerce

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Abstract. The mode combining live-streaming with e-commerce, namely live commerce, is an emerging platform for interaction between consumers and sellers, greatly impacting the retail industry and consumer shopping habits. It not only promotes economic development, but also manifests some problems, especially amid the COVID-19. This essay uses online focus group interviews as the research method to help analyze and summarize the performance framework and interaction ritual between consumers and anchors, as well as the reasons for negative feelings during and after the interaction. Based on the perspectives of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Randall Collins' interaction ritual chains, this essay finds that the performance framework in live commerce is composed of performance areas, teams and stages, while the interactive rituals are formed by the virtual body co-presence, boundaries between insiders and outsiders and collective symbols. Research on live commerce is significant to help consumers avoid irrational shopping and indirectly improve the live commerce ecology in China.

Keywords: Live commerce · Dramaturgical theory · Interaction ritual · Consumer psychology

1 Introduction

Under the influence of the COVID-19, online economy has become an important part of China's economy. E-commerce, tourism, education, training, business, poverty alleviation and other live broadcast scenes continue to extend. The scale of live broadcast users in China is getting larger, forming a national live broadcast era, which in turn boosts the live broadcast economy to become the new engine for expanding domestic demand and promoting dual circulations. Live commerce constructs a more diversified and vivid scenes and create symbols to manipulate people's identity fantasies, making the audience fall into a consumption carnival. So, how does the live commerce carry out the performance to attract the audience? How does it stimulate the audience's shopping desire? The study of the above questions can clarify the psychological aspects of online viewers' indulgence in live commerce and help live streamers better improve the quality of live streaming while promoting live viewers to analyze themselves and avoid irrational consumption.

Due to the restrictions of geographical areas and epidemic prevention and control policies, this paper uses the online focus group interview as the research method. Through the observation and recording of the discussion process of the five participants, combined with Goffman's dramaturgical theory and Collins' interaction ritual chains, this paper sorts out the performance framework and interaction ritual in live commerce and obtains a deeper understanding of consumers' shopping psychology and the reasons behind it. This methodology is instrumental in stimulating mutual discussion and interpersonal interactions among participants instead of just talking to the researchers. It not only provides researchers with the opinions of each participant individually, but also presents a collective explanation of specific phenomenon by a specific group in a particular context. Due to the principle of confidentiality of focus group interviews, the names of the participants mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.

2 The Performance Framework in Live Commerce

Goffman's dramaturgical theory systematically displays how people perform themselves in different ways in their daily interpersonal communication, trying to practice impression management techniques to achieve a certain goal. This theory can be a guideline for analyzing the performance framework in live commerce. At the same time, it is also conducive to developing this theory's new connotation in the era of new media.

2.1 Stage Extension: Link Online and Offline Scenes

Traditionally, dramaturgical theory was mostly applied to daily offline scenes. In the era of new media, with the development of video live broadcasting technology, online information space can be organically combined with offline scenes. In the field of live commerce, companies, platforms, and live streamers employ the convenience provided by media technology to integrate online live rooms with offline scenes, like commercial production bases. For example, in May 2020, the short video platform Kuaishou showed a live broadcast of the food processing of the food factory Zhiweixuan, leading hundreds of thousands of online viewers to watch the whole process of food production and packaging at the same time. This novel way makes the live room closer to the actual offline scenes, improving the authenticity and reliability of live commerce and bringing customers an unprecedented shopping experience. "The real practical value of live streaming is that it extends the information space into a space for daily behavior" [1]. As a result, the performance stage in the live commerce has been greatly extended by breaking the spatial and time constraints of online and offline scenes.

2.2 Troupe Cooperation: Maintain a Well-Designed Performance

In addition to the individual, there is also a form of team performance. Goffman defined the term "teams" (also called "troupe") as a set of performers who cooperate in presenting a single performance [2]. Live commerce is also a performance that requires troupe cooperation.

In China, it is obvious that the top live anchors, like Viya Huang and Austin Li, all have their own teams. Although there may be only two people showing in front of the camera, there are dozens of people behind it. “We commonly find that the definition of the situation projected by a particular participant is an integral part of a projection that is fostered and sustained by the intimate co-operation of more than one participant, and, moreover, that each member of such a troupe or cast of players may be required to appear in a different light if the team’s overall effect is to be satisfactory [2]”. In Austin Li’s live room, apart from him, there is also an assistant, that is the vice anchor. The assistant’s task is to display products, supplement key information and cooperate with the anchor’s performance. Moreover, before the live-streaming, there are a group of staff to help select products suitable for the target audience, and arrange appropriate live scenes in advance. That is to say, “The live commerce is not entirely an individual behavior. This industry is under the support of professional organizations, like Multi-Channel Network (MCN) companies, which have many advantages in terms of capital, channels, technology, personnel, etc. They can help anchors distribute, disseminate and integrate resources of content, making live commerce operate like a troupe. The corresponding performance framework and script have been pre-designed to ensure the final success of the performance [3]”.

Thanks to the advanced technology, online viewers can interact with live streamers and other viewers in real time. So, it is worth noting that the responses made by viewers can also be an integral part of the whole performance [4]. For example, when the anchor recommends a product, some viewers will immediately comment that “I am ready to place an order!”, “It looks great!” and so on. These comments are visible on screen both to anchors and to other peer viewers, thus creating a fierce purchasing atmosphere and helping anchors achieve their sales goal. Therefore, the audience are also members of the troupe.

2.3 Backstage Presentation: Merge the Boundary with the Frontstage

“We often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented. We find that access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from seeing backstage and to prevent outsiders from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them [2]”. However, in the era of new media, technology empowers everyone who can access to the internet to live broadcast. Many of them actively dissolve the border between the front and backstage in order to create a common immersive space between the anchors and the viewers. For example, some anchors would share their own stories or introduce their friends to the viewers in live commerce. It seems that anchors and viewers are good old friends. The streamer Austin Li once said in an interview that 90% of his state in front of the stage and behind the stage is the same. He and his teams even filmed and produced a show called “Offer for All Girls” to reveal the scenes that originally belong to the backstage, like the process of the anchor bargaining with the brand companies for the benefit of the audience. This show has attracted many people, especially the female. Because it shows the backstage that the audience wants to see but usually fails to. Meanwhile, it implies that anchors and consumers are standing on the same line, winning the trust of consumers and narrowing the distance between them.

However, all of this can just be a part of the performance framework. It's more about catering to consumer tastes than the actual situation. "The active disclosure of hidden spaces can be understood to a certain extent as a strategy for anchors to achieve sales promotion, based on the satisfaction of public curiosity and exploration psychology" [3].

3 The Interaction Ritual in Live Commerce

The performance framework provides action guidelines for live streamers and viewers, while the performance ritual provides motivation for the two parties as a community. Collins argues that emotion is a powerful energy, and that ritual effects and cohesion depend heavily on the degree of mutual attention and emotional sharing of ceremony participants. In this case, Collins' interaction ritual chains gives more insight on the psychological aspects of the live commerce experience.

3.1 Live-Streaming Platforms Make Virtual Body Co-presence

Collins pointed out that interaction ritual (IR) had four main ingredients: bodily co-presence or group assembly, barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention and shared mood. He also believed that bodily co-presence was the primary initiating condition. If not, it was hard to convey participation in the group and to confirm one's identity as member of the group [5].

Nowadays, the popularization of Internet and media technology has realized what McLuhan called "global village" [6]. Human body has been extended by media, making bodily co-presence transformed into virtual body co-presence. For example, live streamers usually post links on platforms such as Weibo and Taobao beforehand, so that viewers from different places can have access to the live room, gathering in one virtual space with virtual body digitized in the form of Internet ID, avatar, barrages and so on at the same time. In focus group discussion, participant Linda said she attended the live stream at 7 p.m. every night, and when she saw so many people online at the same time, there was a sense of ceremony and this feeling was something that she could not imagine when go shopping on her own.

The presence of the virtual body empowered by technology is also the primary factor in the formation of online live interactive rituals. This does not contradict Collins' belief. It can be said that "New technologies promote cognitive shifts and facilitate the formation of interactive rituals. In the new media communication environment, the live broadcast platform uses Internet technology to build a virtual media space for users, and the interaction between viewers and anchors is free from the shackles of material entities" [7].

3.2 Ritually Privileged Groups Exclude Outsides

There are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded [5]. In the era of new media, technology has become a condition for dividing insiders and outsiders. "When the user enters the same live room, the field

of virtual body coexistence is realized. People outside the ‘room’ are naturally excluded to become outsiders, and the viewers in the ‘room’ have the identity of the insiders. This boundary setting for outsiders also objectively creates a relatively closed interactive environment [7]”.

In addition to the influence of technology, emotion also plays an important role. Most of the participants in the focus group agreed that trust is the most important factor in live commerce. This makes them the insiders of the ritual while people who only trust offline shopping the outsiders. Meanwhile, because there are too many live streamers with different styles, following different anchors also makes the viewers become insiders or outsiders to each other. For example, in live commerce, Austin Li often gives honest reviews about the products. Along with his friendly and humorous performance, the streamer gradually becomes the trust agent of the viewers. For his receptive audience, even if other anchors sell the same products, they still follow him. Their unique symbols for excluding outsiders are not product brands, but the trust of the anchor. They will accept individuals who trust the streamer and exclude those who denigrate or distrust him.

3.3 Discourse Strategies Shape Collective Symbols and Accumulate Emotions

Collins emphasized the importance of emotions in interaction rituals and put forward the concept of “emotional energy”, which was inseparable from the common focus of attention among group members. In live commerce, it is the anchors and their teams who lead the viewers to focus their attention upon a common object or activity. In this process, the anchors’ discourse strategies count a lot. “In the live broadcast platform, users symbolize interpersonal interaction through specific words and behaviors, generating a common dialogue framework, and making participants guide their interactive behavior with consensus norms [1]”. For example, some live streamers use specific titles to bring them closer to their viewers. For the viewers or fans of Austin Li, they are very familiar with his slogan like “All girls! Listen!”. It has become a password that calls attention to the focus of common concern. Along with the anchor’s exaggerated facial expressions, gestures and tones, transient but strong feelings come into being.

In the focus group discussion, Wu Di said that when her remarks are recognized or her questions are answered in live commerce, she would feel very happy and would continue to interact with the anchor and other viewers. The continuous output of emotional energy guides the user to enjoy and immerse themselves in the interactive ritual of live commerce. Finally, with the co-construction of streamers and viewers in the live room, the emotional energy is enhanced and begins to transform from short-term emotions into long-term emotions.

4 Reflection: Negative Feelings in the Consumption Carnival

Zygmunt Bauman is very concerned about the living conditions of individuals in consumer society. He believed that the real subject in the consumer relations was consumers themselves. Specifically, it is the personal feelings, interpersonal relationships and social situation of consumers that can never be ignored. This online focus group discussion also concentrated on these aspects and developed an in-depth communication.

4.1 The Subtle Change: When “Need” Is Replaced by “Desire”

In modern society, consumerism usually instills wrong consumption beliefs into individuals in an imperceptible way. But in live commerce, the intention to promote sales is so obvious that this industry has overtly set off cascades of consumption carnivals and stimulated consumers’ desire to shop in the form of entertainment and emotional companionship. Linda, a participant in the focus group, said “the anchors propaganda their products in a funny and exaggerated way. Meanwhile, they say that if we don’t buy it right now, it will be out of stock. So, I don’t have time to think rationally within few seconds. I only know I must place the orders. Successfully buying something really gives me a thrill. (Interview sample)”.

However, in a live room where the number of viewers is larger than the supply of goods, someone’s success in grabbing the goods means someone’s failure in it. Meanwhile, some people even cannot afford to it. Although some anchors would remind viewers when introducing some famous brands that if your salary is not enough, it is better not to buy it, “Those who cannot act on the desires so induced are treated daily to the dazzling spectacle of those who can. Lavish consumption, they are told, is the sign of success, a highway leading straight to public applause and fame. They also learn that possessing and consuming certain objects and practicing certain lifestyles is the necessary condition of happiness; perhaps even of human dignity [8]”. Zoey, an interviewee, said that when she saw the anchor and other viewers in the comment area exclaiming about the wealth of others, she couldn’t help feeling sad because of her modest salary. She felt herself an outsider to this carnival at that moment.

“In the process of consumption, users no longer shop only for the use value of goods, but for meeting their emotional needs [7]”. This is an important reason why consumers are addicted to live streaming and their trust in the anchor may allow wrong beliefs to penetrate life more easily. As Rosy, who has now given up watching live commerce, put it, “Although this kind of consumption can free me from the anxiety caused by uncertainty, this way of gaining satisfaction and happiness is only temporary. Now I just buy what I need. I realize that I don’t need to feel sad about what I don’t need or can’t afford. I don’t rely on these anchors anymore. (Interview sample)”.

4.2 The Fragile Community: When the Ritual Ends, and the Connection Disappears

“E-commerce live broadcasting has become the habitual life field of young people, which helps them avoids social phobia and becomes an important channel for them to seek virtual social, emotional support and identity [9]”. This seems to be a reliable way to relive stress. However, in focus group discussion, Zhang Ye gave us a different story. She shared the experience of being isolated at home during the epidemic. Initially, she felt excited when seeing almost 250 million viewers online in the same live room on Single’s Day in 2021. But she felt very lonely and a huge psychological gap when the live-streaming ended because she didn’t build any strong connection with any one of the viewers. Although she isn’t an out-going girl in daily life, she still longs for a real and stable emotional link.

“When the living space for people is squeezed and when people are unable to find a balance between the lack of security and the desire for intimacy, they turn their vision to virtual space [10]”. Other participants shared similar experiences, especially during the COVID-19 when they can go nowhere but to stay at home to help control the spread of this virus.

This whole process (during and after live commerce) is like the cloakroom community described by Bauman: “people come to the theater, all go to the cloakroom, all hang their overcoats or anoraks on pegs, go to performance, and when the performance is over, they pick up their coats, each one hereafter going in his/her own direction. They would probably never come together again” [11]. The connection between people in live commerce is more fragile than the one built in real life. And many people seem to be starting to avoid building strong relationships with others in reality. As a result, “they seek fraudulent substitutes for the absent real thing. Substitutes are instant cures. They do not treat but exacerbate the disease and make it more difficult to cure” [11].

5 Conclusions

Through online group interviews, this paper discusses the behavioral framework and interactive ritual between consumers and anchors, as well as the reasons for negative emotions in this process. Based on Goffman’s drama theory and Collins’s interactive ritual chain, this paper finds that live commerce industry has brought consumers one step closer to the in-person experience, improving engagement, narrowing the gap between customers and products or streamers. The framework and interaction ritual in live commerce make contributions to achieving sales goal and developing economy. However, the transient pleasure brought by live commerce does not make people get spiritual satisfaction in the long run, but even aggravates the group loneliness or other negative feelings of individuals. People should be alert to the effects of mental anesthesia brought about by it and try to find the real needs while improving the live commerce ecology.

The limitations of this study were that the sample was small, and it was not representative of the full experience of live commerce. Meanwhile, no specific solutions were proposed to solve the negative emotions in the live consumption binge. But it would be meaningful to attempt to analyze this phenomenon in this paper. The further or more in-depth examinations of this phenomenon could also be pursued by other researches.

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