Social Behavior and Self-presentation of Tourist Users in Social Networking Platform: A Case Study of the Virtual Community on Mafengwo.com

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Abstract. The rapid development of Internet technology promotes the diversified functions of social networking platforms, and virtual community is one of them. Meanwhile, it seems that travelling has become a part of people's lives, and no matter whether adolescents or the old may play the role of tourist or potential tourist. These are gradually changing people's life and social behavior. So, this study takes Mafengwo.com, a popular social network related to tourism in China, as an example, using Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and some other related concepts based on the Dramaturgical Theory developed by other scholars to explore the contemporary virtual situation online. The study has led to the ways and characteristics of social behaviors and self-presentation of users act as tourists by analyzing users' comments, pictures, videos, homepages, and so on. Besides, some advantages and disadvantages have been found as well, which might help users in the role of "audience" rationally receive the information provided by "performers" and promote social platforms and "performers" to realize the importance of playing a positive role in interpersonal interaction and spread positive values.

Keywords: Social behavior · Self-presentation · Tourist Users · Virtual community · Mafengwo.com · Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

1 Introduction

The body text starts with a standard first-level heading like INTRODUCTION or any other heading suitable to the content and context. First level headings are in all caps. Copy the content and replace it for other first-level headings in remaining text. Reference citations should be within square bracket [1]. Headings should always be followed by text.

Social networking platforms have gained great popularity in recent years. As the Internet broke through the limitation of time and space, spreading information in a shorter time to attract people's attention, social networking service has become one of the basic Internet applications in China [22]. Besides, with the increase in people's spiritual and cultural demands, travelling has been an indispensable activity for leisure

and entertainment, or even a hobby for some people. And the Internet is the preferred channel for tourists to get information. There are various tourism websites in China, such as Ctrip, Qunar, Fliggy, Qyer, Douban.com, to mention only a few, which provide booking services for air tickets, tourist attractions and hotels, as well as travel tips and experience sharing [26]. Most importantly, the virtual community can help tourists get a sense of belonging and identity.

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory is based on "face-to-face interaction" [10], but with the development of Internet technology and the popularity of social networking platforms, people's interactions are also becoming more diverse and complex, not just in person, but in online communities [2]. Individuals can get satisfaction from self-presentation and these platforms provide users with audiences and opportunities for self-expression. So, this study tried to use Dramaturgical Theory in the virtual community on Mafengwo.com. It is of great significance to the further development of social networking platforms and the improvement of the social climate.

Mafengwo.com is suitable for this study. It has a large number of active and stable users (monthly active users: 26.68 million) [25], which is a symbol of the social networking platform in China. Meanwhile, it also has social functions like Twitter and Facebook, for example, users are able to design their homepages, post weblogs, videos, and comment on others, and gradually form virtual communities and community culture. This study was conducted based on the elements above.

2   Literature Review

American sociologist Goffman used the concept of traditional stage performance to describe the self-presentation behavior of individuals in daily life and developed Dramaturgical Theory [19]. Drama performance consists of many elements, such as the front stage and back stage, performers, audience, drama class, and so on [10]. In recent years, the number of social networking studies from the perspective of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory has been on the rise, mainly focusing on self-presentation research, social platforms and social interaction [8], but few studies are focusing specifically on tourism and tourists.

2.1   Self-presentation and Impression Management

Goffman believed that people wear masks and present themselves in the ways they are expected or they desire to be seen by others [10]. As one of the hottest topics in Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, self-presentation research extends from real society to cyberspace. Tifferet and Vilnaiyavetz [23] studied the effect of gender differences on the self-presentation of users of social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter [23]. In China, scholars mainly studied WeChat, QQ, and Weibo [8].

Additionally, scholars have also studied self-presentation tactics. Jones and Pittman [13] subdivided self-presentation tactics into five dimensions: self-promotion, ingratiation, supplication, intimidation, and exemplification [13]. Dominick [6] extended these five tactics to the online setting and found that self-promotion and ingratiation are the most common tactics used in online personal homepages [6].

Besides, good self-presentation could help achieve the purpose of impression management [11]. Ke summarized the impression management strategy scale of groups starting from college students [14]. Adolescents are able to manage their online impressions with greater degrees of freedom [12]. With the advanced communication technologies, people present themselves in many different ways in the Internet era [11].

2.2   Front Stage and Back Stage

Goffman divided the performance area into front stage and back stage. The front stage is the place where people present performances with a standard, and stage sets and props are required, while back stage is the place where the audience is not allowed to break in, so the performers' behavior is not restricted [10]. However, these concepts have the scenario of face-to-face interaction, for example, Goffman thought that the performance and interaction would be poor without the vivid face-to-face situation [4], which may be not completely applicable in the context of online communities, but technological progress brought changes beyond what Goffman had envisioned [1]. Thus, based on the virtual situation of social networking platforms, the concepts of virtual front stage and virtual back stage have been proposed. The virtual front stage and virtual back stage constitute the real front stage, and the real back stage is secret [26].

2.3   Social Networking Platform and Dramaturgical Theory

In social networking platforms, individuals usually impact others' evaluation through public self-presentation, which is often achieved through likes, forwarding and text comments, to mention only a few [2]. Meanwhile, Rui and Stefanone [21] held the idea that users' self-provided information is not the only source of self-presentation, other-provided information (from their friends or followers) can also affect the self-presentation [21], which may be a challenge for users to manage impression. In general, social networking platforms basically meet the key conditions required by Dramaturgical Theory, but social interaction and the way of obtaining a sense of belonging are also affected [7], which bring both opportunities and challenges to impression management [9]. Therefore, Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory can be inherited and used to explain the phenomenon in social networking platforms, but some contents also need to be adjusted to adapt to the Internet era. For instance, the concept of "performing unit" was developed to replace "drama class", as sometimes the audience participates in the performance, but they are not fixed team members [26].

3   Methodology

This research mainly adopted the qualitative method and got primary data from the online resources of the virtual community of Mafengwo.com, obtaining texts, pictures, and videos from users' homepages, weblogs and interaction information. Then the author analyzed these data by using both text and content analysis. Besides, the author joined the virtual community, participating in some discussions and community activities, and

so on to conduct the online participatory observation. Finally, the author contacted a few users and had an interview with them.

The qualitative method is adopted to conduct this research because it has a lot of benefits. Firstly, the qualitative approach can give a more detailed description related to users' experiences, ideas, and feelings compared with the quantitative approach, which means that it might be much easier to analyze their actions and the meaning of doing that [20]. In addition, qualitative methods such as participant observation, unstructured interviews, and direct observation are most commonly used for collecting data [5], which is in line with this research. Moreover, the qualitative method has a relatively flexible structure, and the design of the research can be constructed or reconstructed to some extent [18], so a thorough and appropriate analysis of an issue could be produced and even complex issues could be understood easily [20].

3.1 Source of Data

The virtual community of Mafengwo.com is active and new content is generated every day. This is the direct source for obtaining the data. And Boyd and Ellison [3] have found that people generally present themselves via the design of their personal homepages, weblogs, and interaction [3], so this research collected data mainly from the materials of personal homepages, weblogs (including articles, pictures, videos, etc.) and replies from other users. Besides, the data was collected among ordinary users instead of celebrities or opinion leaders. Combined with Dramaturgical Theory, different information was classified, and then new cases were constantly added to accumulate and enrich the database. When the new cases could not extract new information, data collection was finished. This work was completed from April 20–24, 2022, for a total of five days. In this process, the author only retained valid information for further analysis and got the frequency and duration of users using the virtual community.

3.2 Text and Content Analysis

Text analysis involves studying from the surface to understanding the deep meaning behind the text. This reflects the process of the analysis from macro to micro, which also needs researchers to analyze them from different perspectives and make conclusions. Besides, people express themselves in various ways in online communication, not only in text but also in Vlogs, photos, emoticons, and many other ways. So, it is also essential to use content analysis to explore some expression ways and motivations. The author firstly selected some users whose information on their homepage was relatively more detailed and complete and there were more replies from others for text and content analysis.

3.3 Participant-Observation and Virtual Ethnography

Virtual ethnography came from ethnography, which is a method specifically for research on the Internet. Since some social interaction between people nowadays is more likely to take place on the Internet and social networking platforms, participant-observation is

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

Number	Nickname	Gender	Age	Job
1	Watermelon	Male	29	Freelancer
2	Shi	Female	31	Researcher
3	April	Female	26	Office Clerk
4	K&K	Male	21	Student
5	An	Female	23	Student

also probably used in a virtual environment online. The author took part in discussions and activities in the virtual community of Mafengwo.com and learned to make Vlogs from an experienced user at the same time in order to summarize some characteristics of social behavior and self-presentation of tourist users and discover some issues and benefits during the process.

3.4 Interview

After collecting, sorting, and analyzing the previous data, the author interviewed five users who have typical characteristics of self-presentation. The content of the interview focused on the way and content of their self-presentation, and how other users on the social networking platform influence them. The interview time between the author and each interviewee was about 20 min to an hour. The interview was conducted by telephone and WeChat Call and the contents were recorded and sorted out in time. Here is the list of the interviewee (Table 1).

4   Results

The ways and characteristics of social behaviors and self-presentation of users who act as tourists in the virtual community of Mafengwo.com are going to be displayed in this section.

Firstly, the behavior done on the back stage is now moved to the front stage. This is the most obvious feature and it is also a special way of self-presentation and social interaction. Take travelling short videos as an example. The videos do not just record the local customs of the tourist destination or the charming scenery of the tourist attractions. In fact, several short videos can tell everything that happens to a tourist from the beginning to the end of the tour, such as packing, eating, sleeping and other daily things [15]. The bond between the front stage and the back stage is gradually disappearing [24]. It is worth mentioning that some people even present their embarrassing things in words, pictures, or even videos and live broadcasting, for example, caught in a rainstorm and getting wet when they are climbing a mountain, or arguing with locals or other tourists, which seem to be more likely to attract people's attention. However, these are the behaviors that were previously done on the back stage as they might have a negative effect on the perfect self-presentation. Now people change their minds. "It gives a sense of authenticity. On

the one hand, people feel that his travel experience and advice are reliable. On the other hand, it is so funny that people can get relaxed." Interviewee Watermelon said. And interviewee An said that it is a good way to release negative emotions by talking about embarrassing things with others. But Zhang and Chang [26] explained this phenomenon by using virtual front and back stage, and they believed virtual back stage is a part of the real front stage [26]. In other words, people still have a hidden back stage that is hard to know in fact.

Additionally, the performer's counterpart (drama class) is not fixed. Sometimes the audience has a dual role. They are the audience and participate in the performance as well [26]. Especially in the process of live broadcasting, the performer and audience have a strong interaction. And during the interaction, some audiences unconsciously become a supporting or opposite role in a performance. Meanwhile, people who cannot know each other in real life become like-minded friends in the virtual community, and some even meet offline and go travelling together. Also, this is a way for people to present themselves. Interviewee Watermelon indicated that other people's evaluation is always more convincing than their own evaluation of themselves, so he cared about other users' comments and tried to build a good social relationship with as many users as possible. He interacts with different audiences and when he gets online gifts from others, he will get a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Finally, the more frequently users use the virtual community of the platform, the higher the stage performance tendency of self-presentation and social behavior has. People using the platform more frequently means that they are more likely to reveal their personal information in their real life, such as their appearance, interests, habits, etc., so they may tend to perform to disguise their true selves and others can only see what the performers want them to see [8]. For example, interviewee K&K said that he accidentally found that his tutor is one of his followers, so every time he posts a photo or video, he has to consider his impression left on his tutor. Thus, it can be seen that even though people enjoy a higher degree of freedom in presenting themselves in the virtual community, it is still hard to separate from the real society completely.

5   Discussion

According to the findings, the new ways and characteristics of social behavior and self-presentation of tourist users have both positive and negative impacts on people's lifestyles and society.

Firstly, it impacts the way people make friends. On the one hand, the virtual platform could shorten the distance between people in different countries, cities and areas and provide people with more opportunities to find some friends with common hobbies travel to some fascinating places they are interested in together, or just chat with each other on the Internet, exchanging travelling information or travelling experience, which is much more convenient to prepare for a trip and make trip tips. On the other hand, it also has a strong possibility to have a bad effect on the relationship between families or friends in real society. Interviewee April said that her mother often quarreled with her as she made many friends in the virtual community and communicated with them all the time, neglecting her family. This shows that users have to realize the significance of striking a balance between the online community and interpersonal relationships in the real world.

Furthermore, the virtual community does offer a venting place for users who are under great pressure from work or study, where they can vent their bad emotions, release pressure, find a sense of identity and belonging, and satisfy psychological and spiritual needs [17]. However, some behaviors, such as flaunting considerable wealth, overeating, and speaking rudely and fighting, might catch a lot of attention at a time, but they may create wrong values as well. Especially for children and teenagers, they are more likely to become fans of these performers and imitate their behavior. This could be harmful to their physical and psychological health [16]. Therefore, it is essential for the platform to improve its management system and give some limitations to this kind of behavior. For the "performers", they have to realize that they have the responsibility of setting positive models and spreading positive values as well. For the "audience", it is important to rationally receive the information provided by the "performers" and pay more attention to those who post valid information.

Besides, it creates a great challenge to protect the privacy of users. When users fill in their personal homepages, post weblogs, articles, pictures, videos, locations, and so on, it will inevitably leak personal information. Also, in the process of social interaction online, there may be some cheating behaviors, which could harm the safety of the privacy of users. And the real-name authentication information which is used to register the platform might have a risk of being leaked as well. Thus, the platform is supposed to improve its functions and technologies to strengthen the protection of users' privacy. Meanwhile, users are also expected to raise awareness of privacy protection to avoid being cheated.

6   Conclusions

In conclusion, even though Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory has a "face-to-face inter- action" scenario, it can be extended to the Internet era, analyzing the phenomenon in the virtual community of social networking platforms. In China, Zhang and Chang devel- oped this theory, and virtual front stage, virtual back stage, performing unit, etc. can be used in the online community. There are three main characteristics of social behavior and self-presentation of tourist users in the virtual community of Mafengwo.com: the behav- ior done on the back stage is now moved to the front stage; the performer's counterpart (drama class) is not fixed; users who use the virtual community of the platform more frequently are more likely to have the stage performance tendency of self-presentation and social behavior. Besides, presenting what people used to do on the back stage and getting others' evaluations are the two ways of self-presentation in the virtual commu- nity as well. These characteristics and ways have a positive influence on people and society. It can not only help people to make friends with common hobbies, going trav- elling together and exchanging information, but also give an opportunity for people to express themselves and escape from the reality and pressure for a while. However, these also cause some issues. It may affect the close relationship between families and friends in real society and lead to negative values as well, especially affecting children and adolescents. Besides, it might have the challenge to protect users' privacy. Thus, people would better pay attention to striking a balance between the virtual community and real society, and raise awareness of privacy protection. The platform is supposed to

improve its management, technologies, and functions to help to spread positive values and protect privacy. The "performers" are expected to set positive models and have a positive effect on society. The "audience" would better rationally accept the information provided by the "performers" and pay more attention to those positive models. In general, this research tried to make a contribution to the development of social networking platforms and the improvement of the general mood of society, but there are still some deficiencies in the research, so a further study is supposed to be done in the future.

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