Goffman on Professional Self-presentation: The Key Issues of Streamers' Professional Identity Construction

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Abstract. The live streaming industry has become an emerging global giant, especially in China and North America, bringing in huge profits every year. Live streamer follows this trend into a new and popular profession. However, streamers' professional identity is underexplored. We fill this gap in the literature based on the dramaturgical theory proposed by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The essay describes the synchronicity between streamers' professional identity and professional self-presentation. Several issues of streamers' professional identities construction have been discussed, including character interaction, presentation of multiple identities, impression management, and the blurring of frontstage and backstage.

Keywords: Professional identity construction · Goffman · Multiple identities · Impression management · Frontstage and backstage

1 Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, the live streaming industry has grown into a global behemoth: 31 million average daily visitors, averaging 2.5 million viewers at any moment [1]. China's live streaming industry had reached $3bn in revenue by 2017, with over one hundred companies offering the service [2]. However, streamers' professional identity is underexplored. This essay describes the synchronicity between streamers' professional identity and professional self-presentation. Drawing on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Goffman, it then discusses the key issues: character interaction, presentation of multiple identities, impression management, and the blurring of frontstage and backstage.

2 Literature Review

Goffman used many performance terms to explain the presentation of the socialised features of the self. Goffman [3] aimed to provide a universally applicable framework for examining social interactions and reflecting modern people's everyday lives.

Goffman's work provides an interpretive framework for self-presentation and identity, which scholars have refined to suit different contexts. Bullingham and Vasconcelos [4] showed that the performance theory applies online; the high potential for self-editing on the Internet invites the further development of Goffman's framework. Pearson [5] combined Goffman's dramaturgical theory with Granovetter's concept of social ties, indicating that online identity construction is a deliberate performance, and that social networks can foster fluid and playful identity construction. In an offline context, Donley and Jackson [6] examined the stigmatisation of vagrants, using Goffman's stigma theory and the personal front as theoretical frameworks to show how individuals consciously or unconsciously present themselves in ways that elicit a particular response from others. Goffman [3] believed that playing an appropriate role for a special context and a chosen purpose produces 'coherence'. Heinrich [7], conversely, points out how a new presentation of self arises when identity and language are incoherent. Lipovsky [8], based on a qualitative analysis of four interviews, found that both the systematic approach and politeness theory were useful for identifying key factors and explaining participants' motivations.

The application of Goffman's ideas to the construction of streamers' professional identity is under-researched. This essay fills a gap in the literature analysing a variety of streamers and identifying the key issues of professional identity construction.

3   Applying Goffman's Framework to Streamers' Professional Identity Construction in the Context of Presenting the Professional Self

Goffman [3 p. 253] argued that the mechanism of self-presentation consists of backstage control, team collusion, audience tact, etc. By extension, streamers' professional self- presentation may involve needing to play a character in order to deliver an impression. It can therefore be separated into various components: interaction, back region control, multiple roles, specific settings, etc. This section will discuss the key issues of professional identity construction.

3.1   The Interaction is the Performance

Goffman [3] defined "social actors" as people who try to achieve a specific purpose by playing an appropriate role in their interactions with others. Streamers play a character that constantly interacts with the audience in various forms. During a live stream, various interactive activities occur, such as sharing emotions, playing games, and communicating information [9]. For example, [10] e-commerce streamers communicate with viewers in a multi-sensory way: viewers can hear the sound and see the action, and the streamer can see the real-time text messages sent by the viewer. This process constitutes the streamers' performance in the 'drama'. Caza and Creary [11] propose that professional identity is constructed subjectively, influenced by interpersonal interactions. Pratt [12] illustrates how 'doing, acting, and iterating' in social contexts play an active role in individuals' professional identity construction. Interaction as performance is therefore a key issue in professional identity construction.

3.2   The Presentation of Multiple Professional Identities

Live streamers have a professional identity due to their online persona created as their brand, and due to live streaming's compatibility with other platforms and forms of media, live streamers' persona can be considered a personal brand with a multiple identities structure. According to [11] Caza and Creary's classification of multiple professional identities, streamers with multiple performed selves could be classified under "intersection", commonly performing in multiple roles in front of the same audience at the same time, and delivering a special impression. Often, the audience's impression of a performer is based on their expectations of the character structure. Old Chen is an example. Police officer Old Chen became popular for his humorous image during an anti-fraud live promotion, a mission led by the Chinese public security authority to inform citizens about the knowledge of the prevention of wire fraud, bank card skimming and identity theft. He later resigned from the police [13] and was accused of making indecent gestures and discriminating against women while live streaming. His dialogue with another streamer, which has been faithfully translated into English with irrelevant information filtered out, is excerpted below. (See Table 1).

Here Old Chen has a dual identity: officer and streamer. The officer identity has largely contributed to the refinement of the streamer identity. Reverence for the police enabled Chen to give instructions to Streamer 1. This completed the construction of his identity from a policeman to an anti-fraud streamer. The second phase of Old Chen's streamer career came after he resigned from the police. This live recording bringing Old Chen into disrepute is from a video posted by NetEase News, a popular private Chinese newsagent, in June 2022. It has been translated into English (see Table 2).

This recording led to Old Chen's performance collapse. After losing his police identity, Old Chen's identity structure has become singular. The content was also no longer about anti-fraud promotion. This set the stage for Old Chen's performance disintegration because his presence had become inconsistent with the audience's established impression. The indecent gestures and speech undermined his previous image as a funny, goofy

Table 1. Old Chen's dialogue with Streamer 1 (Source: China Police Network 2022).

00.03 Old Chen Hello, I'm an anti-fraud streamer, please tell me what streamer you are	00.20 Old Chen I do not say you aren't a good cit- izen; I am doing anti-fraud promotion.	00.47 Old Chen That's good. First of all, the National Anti-Fraud Centre App, you guys, please remember to download. And when you talk with others later, tell them to download this app, a task explained by Officer Chen
00.13 Streamer 1 I am a joke, bro, and law-abiding absolutely.	00.38 Streamer 1 I am funny. The gifts they send are voluntary. I never cheat them	01.28 Streamer 1 Yes sir!

Table 2. The dialogue between Old Chen and Streamer 2 (Source: NetEase News 2022).

00.21 Old Chen You're not as popular as me. I have 40,000 followers and yours are all going from my live room.	00.25 (Old Chen turned around and held his hands up on either side of his chest).	00.34 Streamer 2 Can you dedicate a talent show?
00.23 Streamer 2 Why do you think less of me?	00.32 Old Chen I would beat myself up over it, okay?	00.36 Old Chen My talent is bluff. You are what I blow up, you are the fake.

officer. In Goffman's terms [3 p. 212], Old Chen's performance disruption is a form of 'faux pas'. When his face as a weird and crude performer was imposed on the audience, the image of his performed self suddenly broke down.

Due to live streaming often being just a singular facet of an influencer's identity, there are frequently conflicts in the interplay of the multiple online identities. The different roles in streamers' character structure are simultaneously present. Those in other professions use their identity as a streamer as a means to share their expertise and skills. In other words, a streamer's other professional identities fuel their streamer character, providing them with content and subject matter for their live content. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers on live platforms educated their students on the subjects that they taught, pointed out students' misunderstandings, and answered any questions that arose [14]. Abbott [15] identifies a defining feature of professional work as the ability to claim jurisdiction, i.e., the ability to define, judge, and extrapolate expertise. Back to the case of Old Chen mentioned above, the loss of his identity as a police officer deprived him of his ability to practice, and have jurisdiction over anti-fraud, but left him with all of his remaining knowledge on anti-fraud. By extension, when a powerful role is removed, the legitimacy of identities may become tenuous, indicating that the other professional identities that streamers have are a symbol of intellectual discourse or a formality.

3.3 Impression Management Outside of the Live Room

Frontstage refers to a performance venue, whereas backstage – where the audience is sure not to burst in – contains crucial secrets of the performance [3 pp. 107–112]. In Goffman's time, the industrialised Anglo-American society of the 1950s, people's social lives took place mainly in indoor spaces, with clear demarcation between front and back regions. Goffman [3 p. 123] noted that the line separating front and backstage is everywhere: for example, a home's bedroom and bathroom are commonly off-limits to the audience. However, [16] broadcast media have considerably shifted the boundaries between frontstage and backstage. Hogan [17] extends Goffman's dramaturgical approach to an exhibitional one, arguing that since social networks cannot limit the time, place and background of the viewer, the front stage has become unpredictable. [18 p. 381] Performances can be extracted from one scene and rescreened in a completely

new setting. The age of online media has created the role of curators who show only what they want unknown viewers to watch. The distinction between frontstage and backstage is therefore only made in relation to a particular performance [3 pp. 127–8].

A professional live streamer interacts with the audience both inside and outside the live room. They commonly build a face-work, the key factor constructing identity, through an exhibitional approach. In other words, [18, 19] their self-narrative is shaped by professional identity, constructed in turn by the mixture of public and private life. According to Lu et al. [20], live streamers prefer to use instant messaging software to interact with their fans away from the live room. In fan groups, fans can choose to reward streamers by direct transfer via PayPal, Alipay, etc., and streamers have said that they gladly feel the concern and advice of followers. Goffman [21] suggests that the 'face' is the positive image that people claim for themselves through their manners in social interactions, and that the reinforcement of face brings positive emotions to the performer. Interaction through social media enhances the face-works and the professional identity as well. Professional streamers commonly post pictures, videos, and remarks on media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Weibo, etc. As a reflection of loyalty to performance discipline and mindfulness of role, these drive the streamers' off-air image, matching the image viewers expect [3 p. 218]. Streamers who exhibit 'artworks' off-air that do not fit their character set may face impression management failures. For instance, after White, who was the most popular game streamer in China, posted a video of PUBG on Weibo, accusations of cheating came pouring in, and continued despite his subsequent explanations. Viewers argued that White, a PUBG novice in his live streaming, could not be as skilled as he was in the video [22].

Live streamers' use of social platforms is an extension of the live streaming. This is not only because of the demand for coherence in impression management, but also because streamers need to retain followers on other platforms to attract advertisers. Their off-air activities therefore tend to be enmeshed with their careers. Professional streamers carefully select 'artworks' to exhibit to their target audiences, although here the audience is an abstraction – their time-space-identity is unpredictable. This is a method of managing the impressions which the imagined audience beholds. Moreover, the freedom to express live streamers' true selves on the Internet therefore becomes the price of professionalism.

4   Conclusion

The key components that make up the mechanism of professional self-presentation exist alongside the issues of professional identity construction. The multiple roles that streamers play make up the professional identity structure. Meanwhile, streamers' off-air interaction is an extension of their live broadcasts. This role-playing, in and outside of the live streaming, constructs the streamer's identity. Finally, streamers' special equipment is the mark of professionalism. Future research could use semi-structured interviews with streamers, and more fully explore the issues in professional identity in relation to Goffman's other theories, such as framing theory.

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