

The “Exchange Rate” of Celebrity Capital: Zelensky’s Political Crossover and the Dynamic Construction of Persona

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Abstract. In the context of the mediatization society, the cross-field of celebrity capital has become increasingly prominent. The transformation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from a comedian to a political leader provides a typical case for this phenomenon. This study focuses on Zelensky as the research subject and employs the case analysis method, combined with Bourdieu’s field theory and Marshall’s persona theory, to explore the conversion mechanism of celebrity capital in the political field and its influencing factors. The study finds that the “civilization president” persona constructed by Zelensky through the TV series “Servant of the people” significantly enhanced the “exchange rate” of his celebrity capital in the political field. The strategic use of persona naturalized this image and successfully transformed celebrity capital into symbolic capital. At the same time, the intervention of media meta-capital changed the evaluation standards in the political field, making persona a new source of power, and this transformation process exhibits obvious dynamic characteristics, requiring continuous adjustment of the persona as the domain boundaries change. This study not only reveals the key role of persona in capital conversion, confirms the disruptive influence of media logic on traditional domain rules, but also expands the dynamic perspective of celebrity capital research, providing new ideas for understanding image politics in contemporary political communication. At the same time, it also points out that this capital transformation may bring about domain rule alienation, which deserves further exploration.

Keywords: Mediatization, celebrity capital, field theory, persona, Zelensky.

1. Introduction

Among the various definitions of the celebrity, Driessens innovatively incorporated Bourdieu’s field theory and defined celebrities as a form of capital, namely celebrity capital [1]. Celebrity capital is defined as a relatively independent form of capital that can be transformed in multiple fields. In Driessens’ interpretation, Rik Torfs is used as an example to explain how celebrity capital can operate across different fields, and endowed this theory with practical significance that can explain the phenomenon of celebrity cross-border activities [1]. When discussing the convertibility of celebrity capital, Driessens proposed that there is a kind of “exchange rate” among different forms of capital [1]. However, the influencing factors of “exchange rate” have not been thoroughly discussed. This essay will take Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky—a comedian who

successfully crossed over into the political field, as the case study. Based on Bourdieu's field theory and Marshall's theory of persona study, the research adopts a method combining text analysis and media content research [2,3]. Firstly, it deconstructs the correlation between Zelensky's character portrayal in "The People's Servant" and his real political image; Secondly, it traces his social media image management strategies; Finally, it analyzes how the media logic affects the capital evaluation system in the political field. Through this research, the aim is to reveal the dynamic mechanism by which persona serves as a medium for capital transformation, and to explore the inherent logic of power reconfiguration in the era of mediated politics.

2. The potential connection between celebrity capital and persona

Since the concept of "celebrity" was defined, the formation process has been inseparably linked to the media. With the development of mediatization, the media is increasingly taking a central position in various field of society [4]. Similarly, Braudy revealed the connection between the emergence of the celebrity and the media. At any stage of society, the emergence of new communication media means the strengthening of public images, the accumulation of celebrities' "fame". As society and culture continue to evolve, media platforms based on the Internet, such as social media, have provided celebrities with a platform to constantly update and repeatedly present their public image. As a result, celebrities are able to rely on the media to sustain their existence [5]. Following the same logic of how celebrities are formed, Driessens defines celebrity capital as the media visibility that is accumulated through recurrent and continuous media presentation. The maintenance of it depends on continuous media exposure; otherwise, this capital will soon be weakened or even disappear [1].

The term "persona" is used to describe a public image that is fabricated, constructed and naturalized through media technology [3,6]. Technological media have expanded human senses or capabilities, and at the same time have reshaped human cognition and social behaviors. Marshall et al. believe that persona is a tool used by social media participants to shape their public self [3]. This kind of public self is not only the mediated presentation of one's self-image, but also a performative personality that conforms to the characteristics of the medium or social expectations. Thus, it can be seen that the research on persona cannot be separated from the media context.

With media increasingly occupies the center of social processes, the logic of the media is penetrating into all fields of society [4]. Whether it is the specific type of capital or celebrity's personal image, the role of media representation cannot be ignored. Therefore, the interaction and connection between celebrity capital and persona is possible. As a strategic tool for self-presentation, the persona seems to be able to enhance and varnish the celebrity's capital and influence its transformation in various social fields. Next, this essay will delve into the case study of Zelensky to verify this possibility.

3. The rationale for choosing Zelensky

Vladimir Zelensky is one of the most remarkable cross-border cases of celebrity in recent years, having redefined the possibilities of political figures through his extraordinary transformation from a comedian to a president of state. As the sixth president of Ukraine, his political trajectory has formed a symbiotic relationship with social media. Whether during the presidential campaign or after being elected, social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have become important tools for his self-presentation and governance. This unconventional image of a political figure not only reflects the disruptive changes in the construction of political personas in the digital media

context, but also serves as a classic example for studying the migration of celebrity capital to the political field.

3.1. Zelensky's initial capital accumulation

In order to structure Zelensky's celebrity capital and the reasons why he was able to enter the political arena, it is necessary to explore his original capital. According to the definition of "celebrity capital" which means being repeatedly exposed by the media, for a person to become a celebrity or possess "celebrity capital", it requires the assistance of other types of capital [7]. In other words, the reason why a person becomes a celebrity is because of certain characteristics they possess, which enable them to be captured by the media and receive continuous attention. And these certain characteristics can also be analyzed from the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory [2]. Bourdieu believes that the field is a socially autonomous space that possesses its own set of logic, rules and specific power relations [2]. Before agents enter the field, they must possess specific prerequisites to establish their identity [8]. This once again highlights the significance of the original capital. Without the original capital, Zelensky would have no qualification to enter any field. In addition, the original capital also provided resources for the formation of Zelensky's persona to a certain extent.

Zelensky graduated from the Law Department of Kyiv National Economic University (Global Times, 2022). However, he had a stronger interest in performing. During his university years, he self-studied a lot of knowledge related to acting and comedy, which laid the foundation for him to become an actor. This can be summarized as the accumulation of cultural capital. Studying law has enhanced his social science literacy, providing potential intellectual support for Zelensky's entry into politics. Cultural capital was institutionalized and certified after he obtained his diploma. The cultural capital it accumulated in the entertainment field has been further developed in the future. He formed the comedy performance group "Block 95 Comedy Studio". He has previously collaborated with the Russian TV entertainment program KVN and the Ukrainian TV channel 1+1, holding positions such as artistic director, actor, and screenwriter [9]. Since the team was formed, it has collaborated with many traditional mainstream media. The comedy works of Zelensky began to be broadcast on TV stations. During this period, he produced a large number of comedy works, which were precisely exchanged for the cultural capital he held in the entertainment field. These were the objectified manifestations of the cultural capital.

An important detail to note is that, along with the dissemination of his comedy works by the media, Zelensky gained a certain level of exposure and visibility. This means that Zelensky is subtly undergoing the process of "celebrification" [1]. He is undergoing the transformation from an ordinary person to a celebrity. This suggests that Zelensky's celebrity capital is beginning to take shape, and it will continue to strengthen as media coverage keeps repeating itself.

The accumulation of fame also provided Zelensky with the opportunity to meet more people and expand his social network. Among them are many prominent figures from the society. This was summarized by Bourdieu as "social capital", which refers to the resources that a person acquires by associating with individuals or groups in society [2]. Among them, the most representative social elite that Zelensky has befriended is Igor Kolomoisky, a powerful tycoon who spans both the political and media fields. He met Zelensky in the media and entertainment fields. Later, with his abundant political resources, he became Zelensky's mentor in the political field.

In 2015, the TV series "Servant of the people", directed and starred by Zelensky, was released. This TV series received a great deal of praise from the Ukrainian people within a short period of time. The first season of this series had an average viewership of 10.4% in Ukraine. Some people believe that it is the most highly praised TV series in Ukraine in recent years [10]. People began to

become increasingly familiar with Zelensky's face. "Vasily" played by Zelensky is a civilian teacher who unexpectedly became the president. He refused to cooperate with the oligarchs, vigorously punished corruption. At this point, Zelensky received unprecedented media exposure, and his celebrity capital reached its peak. Not only did it continuously provide conditions for him to convert other forms of capital, but it also gave him an inherent political advantage in a democratic society, namely, popularity.

3.2. Obstacles in the transformation of celebrity capital

Driessens emphasized that one of the obstacles to the transformation of celebrity capital is precisely because its convertibility [7]. When celebrity capital enters a certain field, due to its unique nature, it will to some extent disrupt the power dynamics of the target field and even alter the inherent rules. This is also the key reason that leads to the resistance of celebrity capital transformation.

As a comedian, Zelensky's capital type does not conform to the rules and requirements of the political field. Although Zelensky established a political party and became its leader, this can be regarded as a compliance with the rules of the political field. However, he still lacks the ability to command votes and the political field does not accept him. For such an awkward situation of Zelensky, the concept of "symbolic capital" can be introduced to explain it. Bourdieu defined symbolic capital as the recognition or justification of economic capital and cultural capital within a particular field [6]. The core of its existence lies in the acceptance of the capital it holds within a specific field. In Zelensky's situation, although he has acquired the outstanding symbolic capital in the entertainment field that was earned due to his comedy and the large amount of celebrity capital, all of these failed to be converted into symbolic capital in the political field because they were not accepted by the political domain, and even become an obstacle [7]. Or, when they were converted, the exchange rate was extremely unfavorable, resulting in Zelensky being unable to gain political appeal.

3.3. The celebrity capital under the guise of persona

Therefore, the purpose of Zelensky becomes clear here: to somehow make the greatest advantage he possesses – the celebrity capital – accepted by the political field. For Zelensky, this is no easy task. Exceptional acting skills, comedic talent, or high popularity are all insufficient to convince people that he is qualified to be a president. However, this is easier for "Vasily". Due to the high popularity of the "Servant of the people", and because of the similar circumstances between the two, the image of the grassroots president Vasily was deeply associated with that of Zelensky. Vasily became the "persona" that Zelensky had pre-made.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis provides a reference for explaining the operation mechanism of social media persona [3]. It argues that behaviors on social media are divided into two parts: "front stage" and "back stage". The unity of these two aspects to some extent creates an illusion for the audience that the persona is "authentic". The "front stage" refers to the ideal public self that an individual actively presents on social media. This aspect is understood to be filled with promotional elements [3]. For Zelensky, Vasily can serve as his "front stage" persona. The reason why this role was accepted by the political field was not because of its outstanding political abilities, but because of its commoner status, that is, by virtue of its outsider identity, it was able to correct the corrupt oligarchic politics. Zelensky's persona-building strategy has become clearer: he has blurred the boundary between himself and the character Vasily, so that the audience can notice his persona beyond that of a comedian, that is, his "civilian" identity that is separate from the established norms.

Zelensky can be regarded as a “DIY celebrity” who uses digital media to promote democratization. He bypasses the perspective of mass media by acting as a user, and consciously presents and controls his image [11]. The “back stage” is where Zelensky mainly “DIY” his civilian identity. From the perspective of the audience, this part is a passive “given off”, but in reality, it is still the result of Zelensky’s meticulous construction. Zelensky’s attire can be regarded as a set of symbolic elements conveying visual messages [3]. Unlike other presidential candidates, he often wore a denim jacket to attend formal political events and even rode a bicycle to reach the speech venue. Other candidates’ formal attire could be regarded as an adaptation to the rules of the political field. However, Zelensky’s civilian image contradicts these rules, and this conflict unintentionally deepens his image as a grassroots president. This persona was captured by social media and widely spread, visually echoing his political propositions of anti-establishment and anti-bureaucracy.

Hunter believes that the definition of “celebrity capital” should not be understood as a instrument, but rather as a concept that can capture the essence of “fame”. This means that “celebrity capital” is merely a form of public recognizability, lacking specific and clear content. Therefore, its recognition in the political field largely depends on the characteristics of the subject, that is, the nature of this recognizability. In this essay’s discussion, this is reflected in the presentation of the persona.

Under the framework rules of power relations in the political field, coupled with the public’s weariness and disappointment with oligarchic politics, they are more inclined to believe that Volodymyr Zelensky, who holds a civilian identity, is a better choice for this era. He used the modifier “persona” to blur the boundaries between himself and the characters in the TV series, as well as between himself and his ordinary citizen identity. To be precise, the role of the persona is to portray Zelensky as a completely ordinary civilian figure. Swartz pointed out that the formation of symbolic capital does not only occur when it is recognized as something obvious, but also when it is wrongly regarded as capital and is legally recognized [12]. In other words, Zelensky’s celebrity capital, through the embellishment of persona, misleads the audience into perceiving it as symbolic capital that conforms to the rules of the political field. Under the strategic narrative of the media, the celebrity capital is transformed into symbolic capital.

At this point, Zelensky’s celebrity capital has gained recognition and acceptance in the political field. His status was established within the context of “persona”, thus completing the transformation into political capital. This transformation has a favorable exchange ratio and relatively low resistance. This is specifically reflected in his significant advantage in support rates and the attractiveness of political groups. Eventually, through the general election, Zelensky was elected president. The recognition of his political capital has been institutionalized and realized as symbolic capital in the political field.

4. The effect of media meta-capital on the field

The legalization of celebrity capital within specific fields is not only the result of the operation of celebrities themselves, but also involves the existence of media as a unique form of capital in various domains. This kind of capital is referred to as media meta-capital. Couldry summarizes it as a type of capital that operates within then institutional framework of the system at the macro level [13]. It exerts an influence on various capitals circulating within this field through its own media power. From certain perspectives, this is similar to the concept of mediatization, and it also conveys the coverage of the media logic across various social domains [4]. The media source provides a framework for demarcating social issues, thereby giving legitimacy to this kind of expression based on media perspectives.

The symbolic capital in specific fields is also influenced by the media meta-capital. Symbolic capital can be regarded as “publically recognized authority” [12]. Davis argues that since symbolic capital depends on the constantly changing interests and trends of the public, the symbolic capital of celebrities is volatile and difficult to manage, and may even be fragile. The mechanism by which media capital functions lies in the fact that it influences the way the public formulates their “interests” and “trends”.

This has, in an implicit way, changed the rules and power structure of the political field. The representation by the media has become an important factor in evaluating the governance capabilities of politicians. The actual achievements of governance or the political appeal of formal political speeches have been undermined by the media. Perhaps the criterion for electing a president based on political ability remains unchanged, but the involvement of media moguls has distorted the definition of “political ability”, and has also brought the “persona” presented in social media into the evaluation criteria. Vasily’s ambiguous position between Zelensky and others has led people to wonder whether Zelensky is truly an outstanding president or merely “good at playing the role” of an outstanding president. The involvement of media moguls has once again brought about complex topics related to the authenticity of celebrities in the political field [14].

5. The dynamic relationship between the field and the persona

As mentioned earlier, the cost of converting celebrity capital through the use of “persona” into symbolic capital lies in the alteration of the inherent power structure within the political field. However, the relationship between persona and the field is not a one-way and fixed one; rather, it seems to be dynamic. Bourdieu’s perspective on social fields does not impose any significant restrictions on the scope of the fields [6]. The definition of media meta-capital mentions that one of its functions is to define the boundaries of the field [13]. From this perspective, the scope of the political field has expanded globally due to the interconnected nature of social media, starting from Ukraine and extending to the entire world. The requirements of the world political field are different from those of the Ukrainian field. Just as in the current international context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Zelensky needs to constantly adjust his persona to meet the demands of the international community. Facing the Ukrainian soldiers, he is to play the role of the military commander who was with them. Facing the Western countries, he is to play the role of the leader of the free world. Zelensky cannot maintain his “civilian president” persona forever. He needs to constantly adjust it to adapt to the constantly changing boundaries of the field.

6. Conclusion

This essay analyzes the cross-over process of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from a comedian to a political leader, and explores the transformation mechanism of celebrity capital in different social fields as well as its dynamic relationship with the persona. The essay finds that Zelensky’s successful cross-over not only relies on his original celebrity capital, but also through the carefully constructed “civilian president” persona. This process reveals the core role of media in contemporary society, namely that media not only shapes the public image of celebrities, but also redefines the rules and power structure of the political field through its media meta-capital power. The case of Zelensky demonstrates that the transformation of celebrity capital is not always smooth. The persona may embellish the celebrity capital, enabling it to transform into symbolic capital in a specific domain. However, at the cost of field alienation, this also requires the persona to constantly change to meet the requirements of the field. This also indicates that the issue of defining the

boundaries of the field still requires in-depth study; otherwise, the operational scope of persona will lose its fundamental basis. Overall, this essay provides a critical dynamic perspective on the theory of celebrity capital, emphasizing the central role of media and public image in the transformation of capital. The case of Zelensky not only validates the potential connection between celebrity capital and public image, but also provides new directions for future research. For instance, it could explore the conversion mechanisms of celebrity capital in other fields, or further analyze the long-term impact of media meta-capital on the rules of the field. In-depth discussions of these issues will help to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multidimensionality and complexity of celebrity capital in contemporary society.

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