

The Carnivalesque of “Counter-Performance”: A Study on Audience Creative Resistance to Gender Narratives in Film Promotion from the Perspective of Pseudo-Drama Theory—Taking Nobody as an Example

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Abstract. In the context of digital media, film promotion and distribution have gradually evolved into a highly planned "dramatic performance". This article takes the promotional practice of the 2025 summer animated film *Nobody* as a research case. By applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory framework, it examines how the "front stage presentation" constructed by the promotional team collapsed due to the occurrence of "deviant" behavior and further triggered the "counter-performance" spontaneously organized by the audience group. Through text analysis methods, the system collected and parsed 70 user comments on social platforms such as Weibo and Douban, as well as the official promotional content released simultaneously. The research finds that from the perspective of the theory of dramatization, the effectiveness of promotional performances is based on the coordination of internal collaboration within the performance team and the consensus of the situation. Once there is a break or contradiction during the performance, the audience may activate their subjective consciousness and instead become the dominant force in reconstructing the communication context. This research provides a new theoretical entry point for examining the brand communication crisis and the creative resistance of the audience in the digital age.

Keywords: Dramaturgical theory, Film promotion, Gendered narratives, counter-performance, Audience resistance.

1. Introduction

With the deep penetration of digital media and the rise of social platforms, film promotion has evolved into a highly complex, real-time, interactive and uncertain "impression management" practice. At present, the issue of "performed sincerity" in stereotyped gender narratives and promotional strategies has increasingly become the focus of public supervision. To cater to market demands or create a buzz, many films tend to use formulaic gender labels, such as "independent women" or "family guardians", to package their content, attempting to construct narratives that align with social expectations or "front stage" hot topics. However, when such business strategies are disconnected from the core narrative of the film, they face a higher risk of exposure in the hyper-

interactive digital environment. The authenticity of their motives is increasingly being scrutinized by the sharp-eyed public. This transformation marks the entry of film marketing into an era where audiences are no longer passive recipients of information but "active participants" with strong deconstruction and reconstruction capabilities.

A good example of this situation is the promotional crisis of the 2025 summer animated film *Nobody*. Originally, the movie was able to create a front-stage impression with an image of a warm-hearted, family-friendly story. Nevertheless, in one situational instance where a user-focused promotional event was held with mainly female users on the Xiaohongshu platform, offensive comments by a guest speaker grossly overstepped the integrity of the film, disintegrating its well-calculated performance team. The main feature of this case that is especially interesting to study is that the reaction of the audience was not only an emotional outcry. Rather, it quickly became a creative "counter performance" carnival, whereby spectators literally took over the narrative, and effectively re-framed the meaning of the film into an immensely catchy narrative of the suffering office worker. This routine clearly depicts the agency of the audience in the digital era.

This chain of promotional performance-performative breakdown-audience resistance is the subject of a fundamental analysis of the dramaturgical theory enacted by Erving Goffman. The literature available has examined the digitalization of dramaturgy and the performativity of gender marketing and provided a background insight into commercial communication. Nevertheless, the current discussions mostly focus on the construction of the brand's own front stage, relatively neglecting the dynamic process of how digital audiences transform from passive receivers to active counter-performers after the performance goes wrong.

The following are the main objectives that this study tries to meet in addition to describing the course of events unfolding in this case: First, to show the inner workings of the misbehavior of the promotional drama team and the general reasons for the failure of its authenticity. Second, to concentrate on the way in which audiences worked towards creating shared practices of collective counter-performance based upon discursive strategies, including news symbolic appropriation and narrative reconstructions, with a success eventually attained in securing interpretive authority. The purpose of the study is to enrich our knowledge on the interactive logic of performance and resistance in brand communication during the digital age, as well as to provide the theoretical insights of creative cultural practices of the audiences in a mediatized society.

2. Literature review

2.1. The development of dramaturgy theory and its digital adaptation

In this paper, it is explained that dramaturgy theory has evolved together with digital technologies, contributing to the digitalization of dramaturgy. Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, proposed the theory of dramaturgy in systems [1]. This theory describes social interaction as a performance in which individuals assume roles of drama on how to control the impressions of others in a particular situation [2]. Its main ideas are the front stage, which refers to the official sphere where people act following social conventions, and the back stage, which refers to the personal areas where the individuals may travel without fear of violating social rules and rehearse how to act on the front stage. Performance teams are individuals or groups that work together to ensure that a single define the situation [3]. The views of Goffman are based on the concept of symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the fact that social reality is produced through daily interactions, and symbols are used. Other studies that followed this theory took this micro-interactions theory to other fields, such as organizational communication. Since the thought of

Goffman became more refined in thinking, the concept merged with Frame Analysis theory that examines what schema people employ in thinking of experiences as a way of giving them underlying scripts to perform [4,5]. The age of digital has enabled its usefulness by reaffirming the relevance of dramaturgy. The emergence of social media is collapsing front stage-backstage categories, bringing about the phenomenon of context collapse and making the audience much more interactive [6]. Offline self-presentation of individuals is perceived as a digital display, in which the performance stage is no longer confined by the boundaries of time and space, and the virtualization of the scene enables the stage to move along with the performers [7]. Dramaturgy has attained contextual appropriation and extension into multi domains with the emergence of new media. Its past inputs had been minimal as they had focused on actors and had not created much consideration to the important roles that audiences can bring [8].

2.2. Gender marketing: a commercial practice as “performance”

Feminine marketing especially commercial advertisement has become a sophisticated performance in commerce. According to the work of Goffman, Gender Advertising, gender advertisements reflect the inequality between the two sexes in real life through the size, body type and posture of the characters. Women are presented as weak, passive and submissive images [9]. This point of view indicates how commercial communication has been involved in creating gender norms. Gender marketing in the modern day has assumed a more intricate shape. On the one hand, marketing activities such as Femvertising are aimed at breaking the older stereotypes and are being based in habits of a positive and empowering message about women. Dove (Real Beauty) and Nike (Dream Crazier) campaigns are effective in forming emotional associations with audiences through the representation of various female images, and it is a win-win both in terms of commercial and social value [10,11]. Conversely, this performance is questioned on its authenticity. Opponents argue that the opportunistic lack of feminism of most brands trying to posture as feminist is mostly legitimizing themselves as providing the feminist brand rather than actually working to create gender equality [12,13].

2.3. The collusion of gender narratives and performance marketing

Using the dramaturgical theory in the analysis of gender marketing, the logic within it is unveiled as an implication management strategy. Brands as teams of performance painstakingly create an idealized self which corresponds to social expectations using symbolic resources such as advertisements and social media content when acting on the front stage. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such performance depends not only on inner collusion in the performance organization but also on the collaboration of the audience. When there are mistakes in the performance, or the views of the performance team are inconsistent, the image of genuine performance built carefully is ruined and the audience becomes suspicious and begins to perform against the society.

The arena of such social performances is played in brand marketing. Appropriating feminist discourse, they make ideas such as power of empowerment to be consumed as symbols and thus are engaged in reproduction of targeted gender norms [14].

Altogether, the dramaturgical theory proposed by Goffman is a strict and definite explanatory model, which can be utilized to analyze the promotional campaign of Nobody. The promotional crew and the guests they invited served as a performance team and the front stage execution was altered by the internal team members when their tongue slipped resulting in the destruction of the

definition of an already defined family-friendly situation. Later, the audience in online platforms used the interactive nature granted to them by the media to actively criticize and redefine the interpretation of the film in some way through a kind of counter-performance. In this research, the general concepts will be applied to an exhaustive analysis of the textual information gathered.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Research methods and subjects

A text analysis is used in this study under qualitative research, where two main types of textual data are used.

First it is the user-generated content, that is, comments, posts, bullet comments and other texts directly involving the promotional event of *Nobody* on August 10, 2025, which are publicly posted by users on such social platforms as Weibo, Douban, Bilibili, and Zhihu. All these readings are evidences of the immediate response of the audiences to the performance deviance of the promotional event and the counter-performance practices thereof.

The second category includes official promotional sources, such as the main press releases by the official Weibo account of the film, and central transcripts of interviews with the director and the main creators of the film over the period of study. These materials are then contextual background and official references of scripts to be analyzed, as a contrast to the user responses.

3.2. Data collection and sample selection

In order to make sure the data is authentic and rich, this paper appropriately gathered information between August 11 and September 10, 2025.

In the case of the first type of user text, multi-platform searches were carried using keywords like *Langlang's publicity*, *Fu Shouer Langlangshan*, *Mother Pig leaves*, *Publicity rollover* and *Family divorce*. The data sifting rules are: ① obviously indicating this publicity event; ② in the words, it must be accompanied by explicit emotional attitudes and projections of opinions; ③ the content should not be copied and pasted. To reach the theoretical saturation, the research team reread and screened several times, and at last it chose a total of 70 useful text samples, 30 of which were Weibo comments, 20 were Douban film reviews and discussion area posts, 12 were B station related video bullet screens and comments, and 8 were Zhihu Q&A.

In the case of the second type of background material, the official media press releases, full-text interviews with the director, were gathered within the same time duration. The criteria that are used in selecting this form of material are: the source is authoritative or possesses large public influence; the piece is explaining the central positioning and publicity purpose of the film.

3.3. Text analysis and coding framework

In this paper, the author is utilizing thematic analysis, with an emphasis on the former type of user-generated texts. The second group of official promotional messages functions mostly as the background information and reference point; it is utilized to clear up the schedule of the event and official position, which will help to interpret user discourse. The number of collected samples imported to analyze software and coded was 70. The whole process is well placed within the reasoning of the dramaturgical theory, as it seeks to unravel the entire pathway of performance meltdown to a reestablishment of meaning.

Table 1. Statistics on representative film review texts

Theoretical Dimension	Core Theme	Representative Text (source)	Frequency
1. Front-stage performance misconduct	discontinuity of narrative logic	"I intended to let my child experience maternal love, but was instead indoctrinated with the idea of 'escaping the family.' This money would be better spent on buying pork ribs." (Weibo)	14
	Gender labels fail	When capital reduces Fu Shouer and her peers to mere 'independent' patches to be applied over sentimental IPs, every viewer becomes a soldier forced to take sides. (Douban)	4
2. Flaws and the Crisis of Sincerity	Performance team collaboration failed	"The guest and the PR team's scripts were completely mismatched—one advocated for 'emigration, 'the other called for 'return'—it was a total split." (Zhihu)	20
	Underlying motives revealed	This is clearly just a publicity stunt to capitalize on women's issues, completely ignoring the film's substance. (Bilibili)	6
3. Audience Counter-Performance Strategy	Semiotic parody	The 'King's Illusion' of Little Pig Demon: The Most Famous Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Workplace. (Weibo)	4
	Narrative Reconstruction	"This isn't family entertainment—it's clearly 'The Survival Guide for Fighting Monsters in the Mountains,' an epic saga of blood and tears chronicling the struggles of modern workers." (Bilibili)	2
	Collective Action	I had recommended Nobody to many relatives, but that was the last time I did so. (Douban)	16
4. Formation of New 'define the situation.'	The "Working Stiff" Consensus	Every Nobody struggling on Langlangshan is a reflection of ourselves. (Douban)	4

4. Research findings

According to the coding scheme provided in Table 1, this discussion investigates the process of interdependency that takes place in the promotional campaign of Nobody and, as a result, exposing the entire sequence of the chain of performance construction, unexpected slip-ups, audience resistance, and meaning reconstruction. The analysis makes reference not only to 70 texts of the users, but also to the official texts gathered during that period, trying to explain the dynamic process of interaction of performance of the production team and resistance of the audience with the help of the comparative analysis.

4.1. Front stage performance and defines the situation in a performance team: the idealized construction of “family-friendly”

The marketing team headed by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, as a performance team, made remarkable work during the course of promotions of pre-release: on the one hand, they addressed the target audience with the directness of the film content being family-friendly and culturally sophisticated through the application of ink-wash Chinese aesthetic and the images of cute wuzzy creatures that people had to recognize as adorable and charming. Conversely, they emphasized again and again such themes as the development of common men, the sense of family coziness, and the

ties of kinship in interviews with the creative team, purposefully understating the possible problems in the life of the story. This perfect, idealistic framing is best illustrated by the director saying the film is a gift to every family. The initial comments by users like The art style is soothing, it is good with kids, and Shanghai Animation Film Studio production- childhood nostalgia attest to the success of the performance team in exploiting the nostalgia trust in the Shanghai Animation brand by audiences and their tendency to favor traditional aesthetics. This allowed there to be many who accepted the performance and had high expectations of viewing the performance, and when it later collapsed there was high psychological dissonance felt by the audiences.

4.2. Performance deviance and bloopers: internal dysfunction and the bankruptcy of sincerity within the performance team

The promotion event on August 10th was the turning point, and the performance failed. Guests Fu Shouer and Su Min gave speeches as momentary members of the performance team, which were basically completely contrary to the predetermined story. Relying on her own experience as a divorcee, Fu Shouer stated that a 13-year-old child could be independent. Su Min was simply stating that even pig mom could leave Langlang Mountain! These lines were a sharp contrast to the extensively publicized themes in the film: the importance of family responsibility and the necessity to save family ties, which left the plot with a catastrophic gap.

Table 1 shows that the audience reaction shrewdly sought this gap, as one remarked, "It is ironic that this movie about family relationships is being marketed by two people who ran out of their homes to advertise it. More importantly, the viewers tore holes through the front stage and deduced this to be a premeditated traffic-oriented plan. This act exposed the business interests inherent in the strategy of promotion to the point of opening an enormous chasm with the aesthetic ideal of masterpiece and epochal allegory which was the image the studio was trying to create. The overall authenticity of the performance became nonexistent, characterize the state of affairs as a complete disaster, and the emotions of the audience used to turn instantly after the expectation to disappointment and indignation, creating large-scale counter-performance movements.

4.3. The audience's "counter-performance": creative resistance and the struggle for meaning

When it comes to the analysis of discursive practices as applied to the performance collapse we see the change of audience behavior where passive acceptance of the situation turns to active resistance. The model trend, as represented in Table 1, is that of symbolic appropriation and parody: the audiences decontextualize official symbols and add to them new satirical meanings. For instance, the promotional slogan of the film, "To every brave self who sets out", was modified by netizens through photo editing to "To every brave self who divorces". The image of Mother Pig was made into a "Single" emoji. This humorous parody directly deconstructs the seriousness of the official narrative. The second tendency is narrative restructuring and mutual sympathy: viewers are refusing the post-production dictated feminine independence discourse strategy and the antecedent discourse to the film, the family-friendly one, but understand the film as a working-class narrative. The life of the little monster is compared with the 996 work schedule, the king is perceived as a boss, and the work is considered as KPI measurements. Based on the public data provided by Bilibili, there have been several derivative videos, which bear the title There is no Langlang Mountain in the World or feel like you are all on Langlang Mountain, reaching their goal of over 4 million views, which proves the great popularity of the reconstruction. The third trend is satiric negative reviews and mass action: viewers effectively organise one-star negative reviews of promotion strategies instead of the

film itself on rating NPDs in large numbers and challenge official versions collectively. This makes a reversal control of internal review pressure of penalizing performance team due to their insincere performance.

4.4. The formation of new “define the situation”: reaching consensus on the “worker” identity

The counter-performance consumers and viewers engage in is beyond the approach of deconstructing and leads to the ultimate construction and solidification of a new socially-resonant situational definition. When the sentence “We are all little monsters of Langlangshan” started spreading across the sites and turned out to be a trending topic, the realization of a collectively fabricated working-class scenario of a social scenario overpowering that of an official family-friendly discourse became apparent within the limits of the research period. This laborer agreement not only destroyed the initial schematic family-friendly structure but also bypassed fixed gender designation, relating to wider social life. So, the audience shifted to resisters and became definers, and in the space of discourse common to society, analyzed in this paper, this meaning struggle gave a provisional display of the audience performance team's preeminence by the system to build the narrative.

5. Conclusion

Ideally, this work characterizes and extends the term of audience counter-performance in the digital media setting, based on case analysis. Counter-performance is the creative cultural process in which audiences are active agents who deconstruct, resist, and finally recreate the definition of the situation by digital platforms. It happens when front-stage performances, which are institutionalized and even commercialized, experience a crisis of authenticity by slips, capitalizing on the visibility and connectivity of digital space in collective symbolic action, discursive negotiations, and ritualized actions. It is much more than the passive collaboration or inadvertent interference of the original theory of Goffman, and emphasises the agency of audiences in the digital age as a counter-performance team. They not only reveal the backstage but go on to create a new, more echoic counter-front stage.

The analysis presented in this study is based heavily on the analyzed text itself and indicates how the counter-performance discourse developed and was bundled together to form a current. The first spark came in the form of acute recognition of the mistakes by the audience in the performance and moral inquiry, as were expressed in the much-admired comments of the failure of collaboration in the performance team and back-stage motivations on which a basis of legitimacy of action was set. The counter-performance process, in turn, was engaged in a chain of discursive tactics: stirring up emotions and creative imitation of symbols reduced the barriers of participation and caused the emergence of a meme-like activity. Finally, the overall reorganization of the narrative structure provided the much-needed jump in the process of deconstruction-construction. Successful resonant discourses, such as Every little monster is a part of us managed to join people scattered all around under the novel meaning flag. There is a strong sense of development in the whole process: starting with individual emotional interrogation, moving on to finding followers and reaching a common opinion via the beautiful, catchy discursive tactics, which is then cemented into actual, rallied collective action. This explains why the counter-performance in the digital generation is actually a performance that must obtain the right to define. Its performance depends on whether it will be able to provide a new script that will be more authentic and persuasive than the original performance, and capitalize on the social qualities of digital media to produce the contagion and spread of discourse.

The theoretical input of the research is the fact that the concept of audience agency becomes central to the process of dramaturgical analysis. It not only validates the fact that viewers have become major contributors to any given situation in the era of social media, but also, more specifically, it is the active process through which they establish collective resistance through discourse. Audience counter-performance is not simply a resistance practice and is a creative practice of meaning production and consensus-making, so that the range of application of dramaturgy within the mediation of large-scale social interactions is extended.

Nevertheless, the research has its limitations as well. At the moment, the number of collected texts reaches 70, which is not enough to capture fully the representatives of all audiences. Besides, the data collection will be based on manual search of keywords, which may result in missing out certain data. Future research could expand the sample size and incorporate methods such as in-depth interviews and cross-cultural comparisons to further explore the similarities and differences in counter-performance discourse strategies and mobilization methods across different groups and media ecosystems. This would deepen our understanding of audience agency in the digital age.

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