

The Motivation and Psychological Mechanism of Generation Z's Self-Presentation in Social Media

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Abstract. Generation Z's self-presentation behavior on social media has been widely concerned by the academic community, but most of the existing studies focus on the results and impact of self-presentation behavior, and there are still deficiencies in the analysis of its pre-motivational and psychological mechanisms. Based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB), this paper analyzes the motivation and the underlying psychological mechanism of Generation Z's self-presentation behavior on social media. This paper concludes that the self-presentation behavior of Generation Z on social media is not simply positively correlated with the three variables of the planned behavior theory, but is characterized by contradiction and instability due to the influence of complex factors such as social comparison, social pressure, platform algorithms and rules. Based on this, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: improve self-identity at the individual level and reduce the impact of external evaluation on oneself. At the platform level, the algorithm mechanism needs to be optimized to alleviate social comparison and social pressure. At the educational level, media literacy courses can be introduced to help Generation Z youth establish a correct view of information and sharing.

Keywords: Generation Z, Self Presentation, Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Media

1. Introduction

Generation Z refers to the youth born in the mid-1990s to the late 2010's, because this generation of youth is the first generation after the emergence and large-scale popularization of the Internet [1]. With the progress of multimedia technology and the emergence of various electronic devices, such as smartphones and tablet computers, Gen Z has become completely used to communicating in a world that can be connected at any time. Pew Research Center [2] data shows that Generation Z uses social media much more frequently than any previous generation. In the United States, 97% of teenagers use the Internet every day, and 46% of them say they will be online almost all day. It can be seen that social media has become the core scene for Generation Z to carry out self-expression, social communication, identity construction, and so on, and they have become a group that can not be ignored. Therefore, Generation Z's self-presentation and other activities on social media are not only the display of personal behavior, but also the entry point for the world to understand youth culture.

Goffman [3] first put forward the theory of self-presentation and wrote the foundation work of the theory of self-presentation. He compared the process of people's self-presentation to dramatic performance, that is, the famous "pseudo drama theory", which believed that people would effectively shape their image in the hearts of others by controlling their words and deeds. Unlike traditional face-to-face communication that requires instant interaction and feedback, social media gives users the right to modify and edit at any time, a huge audience and a variety of optional forms of self-presentation, which provides a new field for self presentation. Academic circles divide self-presentation into positive self-presentation and real self-presentation, and believe that different self-presentation methods will affect the acquisition of well-being [4]. However, most of the existing studies in the academic community focus on the consequences and effects of Generation Z's self-presentation in social media, and lack of systematic elaboration on its motivation and psychological mechanism.

Taking the theory of planned behavior as the theoretical framework, this study explains and deduces the motivation of Generation Z's self-presentation behavior on social media by analyzing three core variables: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. At the same time, it introduces two moderating variables, namely, self-identity and social belonging, to explore the psychological mechanism behind Generation Z's self-presentation on social media in order to improve this research model.

2. Characteristics of Generation Z's self presentation in social media

2.1. The concept definition and specific performance of Generation Z self presentation

In the context of social media, self-presentation refers to the process of publishing your own words, photos, videos, etc. on various social platforms to shape your image in the hearts of others [3]. Unlike offline face-to-face communication, online self-presentation has the characteristics of being able to edit and change at any time, a large audience, and various ways of self-presentation. Generation Z, as a digital aborigine, has the characteristics of high frequency, multi-platform synchronization and high strategy. Most Generation Z will present themselves on multiple platforms at the same time, and display content strategically according to the characteristics of different platforms and audiences. When facing an audience of strangers, they usually choose to show positive content. In the group of acquaintances, they prefer to show the real-life situations. In a more private space, such as the secondary account, they will show the most real emotional changes [5].

2.2. The performance and psychological mechanism of positive presentation and authentic presentation

The self-presentation of Generation Z can be roughly divided into two categories: positive self-presentation and real self-presentation. Active self-presentation means that users only display the modified and idealized image and content. True self presentation refers to the user's display of an unmodified, realistic image and content. Some Generation Z often choose to conduct positive self-presentation due to the needs of social comparison and their anxiety about their own identity, such as posting travel cards, sharing food, personalized photos, etc., in order to obtain positive feedback in the form of likes and comments [5]. However, in the long run, a large number of Generation Z users felt great social pressure and began to look for "breathing space" for themselves, so other expression positions gradually emerged, such as secondary accounts. The secondary account has become a major front for the Generation Z group to present themselves. It is a private account different from

the main account, which is only open to a small number of close relatives and friends. Here, Generation Z can show real-life conditions, release their real vulnerability and collapse, and even some negative content [6]. This kind of true self presentation meets the needs of Generation Z to express themselves. Although it seems to be opposite to the positive self-presentation of the main account, it is both of them that enable Generation Z users to find a psychological balance between excessive social pressure and self-venting. The positive self-presentation of the main account meets the external social evaluation, and the true self-presentation of other positions, such as the secondary account, meets the internal emotional expression.

2.3. Reaction problems: social stress, social comparison and identity anxiety

Generation Z's massive self-presentation on social media reflects many implicit problems. The first is social pressure. Users usually see a large amount of refined positive content and self-examination and doubt, such as "am I interesting enough" and "am I refined enough". Secondly, this will often lead to social comparison, causing users to have the illusion that "he is better off than me", thus reducing self-identity and self-evaluation. The above two dilemmas continue to force Generation Z to construct their own virtual identity, which will lead to Generation Z's identity anxiety [7]. On the one hand, Gen Z will have self-cognitive bias and deficiencies when browsing other people's exquisite positive self-presentation. On the other hand, Gen Z is facing huge challenges and uncertainties when trying to build its own virtual identity, such as cost, time, platform traffic, etc. This kind of identity anxiety will not only cause psychological problems, but also hinder their communication and self-development in reality.

3. Motivation analysis: based on TPB and other theories

According to the theory of planned behavior, individual behavior is affected by attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control [8]. This section will derive the specific impact path of these three variables on Generation Z's self-presentation in social media, and introduce two regulatory variables, self-identity and social belonging, to assist the analysis.

3.1. Attitude formation: algorithm, social comparison and other factors shape self presentation attitude

Attitude refers to an individual's overall evaluation of something, such as whether it is positive or negative [8]. In the context of Generation Z's self-presentation on social media, its attitude is not static, but dynamically formed in platform algorithm feedback and social comparison. When a user gets a lot of positive feedback on self-presentation content, the user will think that the self-presentation is positive and pleasant. However, when users' presentation content is ignored or even causes negative feedback, their attitude will quickly turn negative. In addition, there are other complex factors that play a regulatory role. For example, when users often watch a large amount of exquisite content, they will subconsciously form a social comparison with themselves. At this time, some users will think that presentation is a source of pressure rather than a source of happiness. Another example is that when the platform algorithm is unstable, users do not get enough positive feedback in time, which will also lead to burnout to a certain extent, resulting in negative attitudes and shifting other expression positions [6]. Therefore, the self-presentation behavior and attitude of Generation Z are positively correlated, but there are uncertain regulatory factors, which make their attitude and behavior contradictory.

3.2. Strengthening subjective norms: important others' expectation, peer demonstration effect and fear of missing out(FOMO)

Subjective norms refer to the influence or pressure that individuals feel from important others or groups, that is, whether others think I should do so [8]. Such norms mainly come from two aspects: one is family and friends in real life, the other is opinion leaders in a virtual network environment. In the "acquaintance society", the role of subjective norms on individuals will be further strengthened [9]. The circle of friends is one of the important places for self-presentation. It plays a role in sharing life and maintaining social relations. Generation Z will strongly feel the normative pressure of "if I don't update, I will not keep up with the trend of the times". This phenomenon is closely related to fear of loss, which refers to the anxiety caused by worrying about missing out on others' beneficial experiences [10]. This fear in turn drives Gen Z to continue to pay attention to the dynamics of others and take the initiative to present themselves. However, when subjective norms are too strong for individuals to bear, they may in turn inhibit behavior (such as stopping self-presentation or turning to the secondary account). Therefore, subjective norms play a dual role in Generation Z's self-presentation. On the one hand, they promote self-presentation behavior, and on the other hand, they also cause fatigue and fear.

3.3. Weakening of perceived behavior control: platform complexity reduces perceived ease of use and self-efficacy

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) refers to an individual's belief in the difficulty and controllability of the behavior to be performed, including perceived ease of use and self-efficacy [8]. However, the algorithm and traffic mechanism of social media platforms are weakening the self-presenting PBC in Z era. First, the algorithm puts Generation Z in a passive state, causing it to fall into the information cocoon room [11]. Continuous browsing of refined head self-presentation content will trigger comparative psychology, but will reduce their sense of control over self-presentation to a certain extent. Secondly, the platform adds many hidden restrictions on sensitive words, content types, etc., and the restrictions implemented by different platforms are not exactly the same, so users need to constantly adapt to the rules of different platforms. Collapse in the rules of one platform and then transfer to another platform. This cycle will form a cycle of "de-embedding" and "re-embedding" [12]. In the long run, social fatigue and information overload will also reduce individual self-efficacy. Therefore, the weakening of PBC will bring two consequences: one is to reduce the frequency of individual self-presentation, and the other is that individuals will be more cautious and rigorous in self-presentation. This is not contradictory to the positive promotion behavior of PBC in the traditional TPB theory, and further reveals the influence of this theory in the algorithmic environment.

3.4. Moderator intervention: how individual self-identity and social belonging change the influence path of TPB

Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control do have an impact on self-presentation behavior of Generation Z, but the impact intensity also depends on individual psychological traits. Therefore, this study introduces two moderating variables, namely, self-identity and social belonging.

Self-identity is an individual's understanding of who he is by internal, lasting consistency and continuity [13]. People with high self-identity have consistency in different situations, and they are

more inclined to transform their internal attitude into behavior. People with low self-identity are more likely to be influenced by others' words and deeds. When self-identity is high, attitude has a stronger positive impact on behavior. When self-identity is low, subjective norms have a stronger impact. The specific impact direction is determined by the nature of subjective norms.

Social belonging is the degree to which individuals feel accepted, cared for and connected with others through interaction with others [14]. Individuals with a high sense of belonging are in a positive atmosphere of high support and are more willing to take the initiative to present themselves. At this time, the positive role of PBC will also be amplified. On the contrary, individuals with a low sense of belonging, even if they have a positive attitude, may reduce self-presentation because of fear of rejection. Accordingly, the sense of social belonging regulates the three paths of TPB.

4. Countermeasures and suggestions: rebuild the correct idea of information and sharing of Generation Z

4.1. Individual level: improve self-identity and reduce dependence on external feedback

Generation Z should first realize that self-presentation should not be entirely driven by external evaluation, and youth groups should reduce their dependence on external feedback. Self-identity can be effectively improved through supportive parents, autonomous support and positive peer relationships [15]. The specific suggestions are to make more independent decisions, establish close friendships, and actively ignore negative feedback. When individuals no longer use external feedback such as likes and comments as a yardstick to measure themselves, behavior will change from passive presentation to active recording.

4.2. Platform level: optimize recommendation algorithm to reduce social comparison and display pressure

The algorithm design of social platforms directly affects the strength of social comparison. The platform should continue to optimize the algorithm to reduce visibility competition, such as recommending diversified content instead of just highly praised content on the head, interspersed with recommended mental health maintenance content, etc. At the same time, the platform should maintain the user's private space, such as reducing the recommendation of "people you may know", so as to reduce social pressure and social comparison, so that Gen Z can express their vulnerability in a safe environment.

4.3. Education level: join media literacy education to establish correct concepts

As the main users of social media, Generation Z is still in the stage of understanding the world and learning knowledge. Their moral values, living habits, and ways of thinking are more vulnerable to the impact of network communication content and public opinion environment. Therefore, it is particularly important to strengthen media literacy education for generation Z. Colleges and universities can introduce the content of media literacy into books and classes, such as carrying out general elective courses such as network media and network mental health, and then educate and guide students to correctly use the media and view the network content critically, so as to establish a correct view of information and sharing [16].

5. Conclusion

Based on the theory of planned behavior, this study draws the following conclusions: generation Z's self presentation behavior on social media is driven by attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavior control, but the driving direction is not simply positive correlation, it is also affected by complex factors such as platform algorithm and social comparison, which will make generation Z's attitude tend to be fuzzy and contradictory, promote and cause negative effects on subjective norms, and weaken perceived behavior control to a certain extent.

Based on this, this study puts forward relevant suggestions at the three levels of individual, platform and social education. Individuals should strengthen their self-identity. The platform needs to optimize the algorithm mechanism and rules. At the same time, they can join the media literacy education course for Generation Z. If relevant suggestions are implemented, they can effectively help Generation Z establish a correct view of information and sharing.

This study makes up for the deficiency of TPB theory in analyzing the complex motivation of self-presentation of Generation Z social media, puts forward its specific influence logic, and expands the boundary of TPB theory. In practice, it provides clear suggestions for optimizing the platform algorithm and strengthening the media literacy education of Generation Z, which is helpful to build a healthy digital environment.

In the future, it can longitudinally track the dynamic changes of Generation Z, and further explore the relationship between its self-presentation and TPB theory. In addition, with the change and evolution of platform algorithm technology and the popularity of generative AI, the impact of algorithms on self-presentation will be further complicated, and researchers need to follow up for a long time.

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