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Analysis on Adolescents' "Personal Image Construction" Behavior in WeChat Moments from the Perspective of Dramaturgical Theory

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Abstract. With the prevalence of social media, WeChat Moments serves as a key space for adolescents to construct personalities, a prevalent online social practice. Sensitive to others' evaluations, adolescents often post polished, idealized content to seek identity and social approval. Adopting dramaturgical theory as the core framework and combining literature review with multiple case observations, this study explores adolescents' self-presentation types, underlying psychological motives and related psychological outcomes on WeChat Moments. It identifies three common online personas: idealized lifestyle, refined appearance, and high-achieving student identities. Such construction is driven by needs for self-identity, peer recognition and fear of negative evaluation. It exerts dual effects: positively boosting confidence and expanding social connections, while triggering social anxiety, appearance anxiety, online-offline self-conflict and the pressure of sustaining idealized images. Drawing on Goffman's frontstage-backstage framework, this paper interprets the logic behind adolescents' deliberate self-presentation and offers theoretical insights into the link between their social media use and mental health.

Keywords: Dramaturgical theory, Adolescent mental health, WeChat Moments, Social media behavior, Persona construction

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the Internet, WeChat has become one of the most commonly used social media platforms. WeChat Moments is relatively open, and users can present themselves publicly, so it has become a place for self-presentation, which has a great impact on adolescents. Carefully edited photos, deliberately planned picture layouts, fashionable place geotags, and carefully selected captions are all common among adolescents' WeChat Moments activities. Such behavior raises an important question: how much real life can adolescents show on WeChat Moments, and how much is carefully constructed? Previous studies have investigated this phenomenon from various angles and drawn different conclusions. For example, the research so far has systematically investigated how adolescents present themselves on social media, and found that adolescents present themselves on WeChat Moments with a certain degree of selectivity [1]. Related research also shows that young people sometimes make perfect and satisfactory online personas to

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reduce or make up for their dissatisfaction with real life [2]. Therefore, adolescents have a special purpose and method when using WeChat Moments. However, frequent engagement with WeChat Moments may exert adverse effects on adolescents. Research shows that the use of social media is significantly correlated with adolescents' mental health, especially self-identity [3]. Adolescence is an important period to establish self-identity [4]. During this period, young people will pay great attention to what others think of them. Moreover, their social conduct often reflects their psychological growth. From the perspective of the sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory [5], combining AP Psychology concepts such as impression management and cognitive dissonance, this study analyzes typical cases of persona construction on WeChat Moments and focuses on three questions: What kinds of personas do adolescents commonly construct on WeChat Moments? What deeper psychological motivations underlie this construction? What are the positive and negative impacts of long-term persona construction on adolescents' mental health? This study will help explain the social behaviors of adolescents online from the perspective of dramaturgical theory. It will provide concrete references for helping teenagers understand online personas more reasonably and maintain their psychological well-being.

2. Core theory: explanation of Goffman's dramaturgical theory

2.1. Core concepts and ideas of dramaturgical theory

Dramaturgical theory was formally proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman in the book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life in 1959 [5]. Goffman analogized social interactions to a theater performance. He thought that people would consciously manage images in front of other people in order to influence the perception that other people had of them. Dramaturgical theory contains two core concepts: front stage and back stage. The first is the front stage, which is where people perform in front of other people. People can shape their words, behavior, and appearance according to the image they want. For example, on WeChat Moments, "the front stage" is reflected in the photos, captions, location tags, and other public information that users post. The second is the back stage, which is the private space where people can stop performing and show their real selves. At the back stage, people do not need to create or maintain a certain "personality" and can simply be themselves. For adolescents, the back stage may include their bedrooms, private moments with close friends, or personal experiences that are not shared on WeChat Moments. Some research has pointed out that in the context of social media, "a performance of self" has gradually developed into "a performance of personality" [6]. Goffman believed that switching of the front stage and backstage is a fundamental feature of daily social interaction. However, in the age of social media, this transition becomes even more complicated. The front stage is gradually encroaching on the back stage, leaving individuals with increasingly limited private space.

2.2. Application of dramaturgical theory in social media contexts

WeChat Moments is a typical case of the "front stage" described in dramaturgical theory. Different from traditional front stage and backstage situation, WeChat Moments provides a function, such as the visibility of time setting and the audience. The function of "the visible for three days, one month, and six months" can help users control how long their posts will remain visible to the public. Different people can see different contents, depending on the time they open a user's WeChat Moments. In addition, functions such as "Hide from Certain People" and "Visible to Certain People" allow users to divide WeChat friends into groups and select different audiences for different posts.

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These two functions create new forms of front stage and backstage. Adolescents can decide what content is displayed to different people and when it is displayed. They can also perform different personalities for different audiences. This provides significant technical support for the construction of personalities on WeChat Moments and improves the efficiency and effectiveness of creating online images. As some research has suggested, young people manage their online images by setting the boundary of personal information. For example, they may show a "good student" image in front of teachers and parents, but present a more "real and interesting" side for their same-age friends [7]. In addition, the likes and comments on the WeChat Moments allow adolescents to receive feedback from others. Through this feedback, they can adjust and improve the personalities they want to create.

3. Typical categories of adolescents' "personality construction" on WeChat Moments

This chapter adopts purposive sampling and selects three typical cases as the analysis objects. All three cases come from the author's daily social scenarios and correspond to three personality types: the person with a luxurious lifestyle, the person with exquisite appearance, and the student with excellent grades. As concrete carriers of qualitative analysis, these three cases aim to reveal the typical characteristics and psychological mechanisms of personality construction behaviors. The conclusions drawn from these cases are not statistically representative.

3.1. Characteristics and performance of the idealized lifestyle personality

The idealized lifestyle personality refers to the presentation of a high-quality, refined, and desirable lifestyle. People with this type of personality carefully select and display certain content to create an idealized image of themselves. One case subject in this study mostly publishes WeChat Moments content related to traveling, visiting popular restaurants and hotels, following stars, and attending concerts, and so on. The style of photos posted by the subject is usually consistent, and photo collages are frequently adopted to demonstrate a rich life experience. The subject carefully plans post layouts and rarely uses an odd number of pictures for each post, with the nine-picture layout as the most frequent choice. Captions are usually short phrases containing emojis, which describe daily moments and record pleasant experiences. When sharing travel photos or celebrity-related content, the participant tends to add geotags to signal changes of location and project a free and varied lifestyle. From the perspective of the subject's WeChat contacts, the subject's life appears relaxed and enjoyable with little pressure, presenting an idealized lifestyle envied by many people. In reality, nevertheless, the subject also encounters numerous hardships and worries, such as heavy academic pressure and pre-exam anxiety. These negative emotions are never released on WeChat Moments, so observers only see the bright and positive side of the subject's life. This produces a substantial gap between the subject's online and offline lives. When peers express admiration after viewing the subject's Moments content, the separation between the online projected self and the real-life self becomes noticeable.

The persona projected on WeChat Moments largely embodies an image of feigned enjoyment of life. Nevertheless, admiration from others satisfies the psychological need for recognition of individuals constructing an idealized-lifestyle persona. Among peer groups in particular, this persona helps individuals stand out, attract attention, obtain positive evaluations, and optimize social-media experience and social efficiency. Sustained maintenance of such an idealized-lifestyle persona, however, may reduce individuals' acceptance of their back-stage real-life conditions, bring extra pressure and anxiety, and blur the boundary between front-stage performance and back-stage reality.

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Such display of "idealized lifestyle" is not an isolated individual phenomenon. Existing research has noted that young people commonly produce well-planned Moments content to exhibit idealized versions of their lives, a phenomenon termed "pre-fabricated WeChat Moments". Namely, users pre-plan post content, choose appropriate release time, and present modified personal life narratives online. This behavior is essentially a dramaturgical performance characterized by adaptability, purposiveness and manipulation [8]. The above case mirrors such analytical conclusions: the subject constructs an online image of relaxed, abundant and enviable daily life, while academic pressure and pre-exam anxiety are confined to the back stage.

3.2. Characteristics and performance of the carefully modified appearance personality

The carefully modified appearance personality refers to the presentation of a carefully modified and idealized appearance. Take the researcher's friend Z as an example. Selfies and other-taken photos posted on Z's WeChat Moments maintain highly unified styles, centering on makeup and outfits. Because the photos are visually striking, captions are generally concise or even absent, directing attention entirely to the visuals. Z shows great interest in cosmetics and frequently researches and purchases products from diverse cosmetic brands. Figures in Z's Moments photos possess delicate, near-perfect facial features, and these images are perceived to undergo heavy editing. Meeting Z offline reveals sharp discrepancies between Z's real-world appearance and online photographic portrayals, to the extent that Z's online and offline selves appear to be two different people. Z once mentioned that considerable time is invested in photo retouching; even after extensive editing, Z often abandons publication due to persistent dissatisfaction with outputs. The constant pursuit of perfect makeup and fashionable clothing exhausts Z on occasion. Even so, Z expects positive online feedback to compensate for insufficient appearance-related self-confidence in real-life contexts. In adolescence, teenagers become exceptionally sensitive to others' evaluations. By sharing retouched self-images and receiving likes and recognition, adolescents can temporarily satisfy psychological needs and gain a sense of self-worth. Continuous enactment of the carefully modified-appearance persona, however, may lead to over-reliance on external evaluation and hamper acceptance of real-world physical appearance, hence amplifying appearance-anxiety risks. Research indicates that adolescent adoption of digital beautification for photo editing correlates significantly with self-criticism. Adolescents who frequently over-edit photos tend to demonstrate stronger self-criticism and lower appearance-related self-confidence [9]. Z's practice of discarding edited photos out of dissatisfaction exemplifies the linkage between self-criticism and appearance anxiety.

3.3. Characteristics and performance of the high-achieving student personality

The high-achieving student personality refers to the presentation of diligence, learning ability, and learning achievements. Take the researcher's former middle-school classmate H as a case. H's WeChat Moments mainly records daily oral-English practice, late-night studying, participation in academic activities, as well as photographs of certificates, trophies and high-score screenshots. Captions range from casual and understated to serious and formal, jointly consolidating H's public image as a hard-working and outstanding student. H once acknowledged that parents, teachers, and classmates hold high expectations of H because of H's perceived excellence. This high-achieving-student persona imposes remarkable psychological pressure on H. Upon exam failure or unmet performance targets, H avoids social contact for fear of disappointing others. Such psychological burden constitutes a persistent mental torment. Relevant research points out that "managing a personality" represents one approach for young people to generate and construct

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identities via social-media practices [10]. A successfully maintained high-achieving-student persona enables adolescents to win external recognition and praise and build a sense of accomplishment, yet it may simultaneously function as a form of self-restraint. The more polished and impressive the external projected image is, the greater internal pressure arises to sustain such an image. Once real-life outcomes diverge from idealized public expectations, adolescents may struggle to accept themselves. Within today's highly competitive educational context, adolescents frequently aspire to attain advantageous social positions, gain recognition and realize personal value. External recognition can be transformed into self-improvement motivation. Blind construction of a high-achieving-student persona, nevertheless, not only adds academic pressure but also imposes extra burdens associated with image maintenance.

4. Psychological motivations and psychological impacts of adolescents' persona construction on WeChat Moments

4.1. Why adolescents build online personas on WeChat Moments

First of all, adolescents' pursuit of self-identity will strengthen the participation in building online personas. Teenagers are always in the process of self-exploration and self-understanding. By using the features of social media Moments, they can try various personas online to choose their own self-presentation styles. At the same time, during this period, adolescents are most easily influenced by other people's judgments. Through Moments, they can immediately collect responses from others about various personas, so as to feel their own self-worth and gain their own identity. The pursuit of peer acceptance will also give adolescents great influence. Need-to-belong theory posits that human beings have a strong need for belonging [11]. And acceptance from the peer group is particularly important. Likes and positive comments received on Moments help adolescents gain a sense of belonging. Second, adolescents are very sensitive and uneasy about other people's negative judgments. Before publishing content on Moments, most adolescents carefully check photos and captions several times. After publishing, they continuously monitor reactions to that post and strongly hope for positive feedback. Adolescents only display their favorable aspects to others to get positive feedback about their self-positioning.

4.2. Duality of impacts of persona construction on mental health

On the positive side, engaging in persona branding through WeChat Moments can boost adolescents' self-assurance. When young people obtain affirming responses from peers, they often grow more confident and experience relief from various everyday worries. Persona branding activities on WeChat Moments can also broaden their social networks. Through repeated experimentation, adolescents are able to discover the personal brand that best fits and aligns with their self-identity. By crafting vivid personal brands, they can attract peers who share similar interests or outlooks based on the traits of their presented personas, thereby reinforcing social ties among adolescents. Nevertheless, this study argues that the adverse effects of such behavior marginally surpass the beneficial ones. Firstly, excessive persona branding creates a gap between the curated image and the authentic self. Cognitive Dissonance Theory suggests that psychological discomfort emerges when actions conflict with internal attitudes [12]. The case of H aptly demonstrates this point. Having failed an exam, H felt compelled to keep up the "straight-A student" image, was afraid to reveal the failure to others, and suffered tremendous psychological strain. Secondly, negative responses can also harm adolescents' mental well-being. Social Identity Theory suggests that self-worth is partly

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shaped by how others evaluate oneself [13]. On social media, the number of "likes" and the quality of comments are publicly visible. Positive responses and a large number of "likes" will bring satisfaction and joy to teenagers. However, negative feedback and fewer "likes" may plunge them into self-doubt and raise online social anxiety. Z's experience is strong evidence of this. Excessive focus on others' judgments and the perceived gap between their online and offline appearance exacerbates adolescents' appearance anxiety. In addition, previous studies have shown that constructing an online persona may expose individuals to a higher risk of social anxiety [14]. It takes substantial time to recheck many times before posting and monitor reactions constantly after posting, and it may be very tiring emotionally.

5. Conclusion

Using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and AP Psychology's concepts, in this study, how adolescents made personas on the platform named WeChat Moments analyzed three main conclusions. First, adolescents created three different persona types: idealized lifestyle persona, carefully curated appearance persona, and high-achieving student persona. Secondly, The performances of adolescents in WeChat circle of friends is driven by psychological motives: desire for identity formation and peer recognition need. Third, persona construction may generate beneficial outcomes, such as heightened confidence or expanded social networks. However, it may generate social anxiety, and appearance-related anxiety may sometimes generate a growing gap between online and offline selves, and continue to maintain the persistent pressure of flawless persona. It is important to acknowledge that this study has certain limitations. The conclusions presented here are based on observational research and a single case study. Multiple limitations should be recorded: for example, sample is relatively small, interviews or surveys have not carried out, and age-related variations is that analysis is only confined in WeChat module, but not with other social media platforms comparison. Subsequent research gathering questionnaire and interview data, and comparing the additional platforms such as Little Rednote and Douyin concerns tackle.

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