

Self-Presentation of Youth Subcultures on Social-Media

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Abstract: In the internet era, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory has been applied and extended to the online realm. As self-presentation in the virtual world tends to become self-exhibition, new media has given rise to new social needs and modes. This study focuses on youth subculture enthusiasts on social media as a research subject, based on the theory of self-presentation, and explores the characteristics and social drivers of self-presentation on social media. Through analyzing specific aspects such as personal web pages, virtual community interactions, and freedom of expression on social media, the study highlights the connection between the unique transmission mechanisms of social media and the flourishing development of youth subcultures on the internet. As the youth subculture groups on the internet continue to grow, this paper also discusses possible directions for the self-presentation of subculture characteristics on social media.

Keywords: dramaturgical theory, self-presentation, social-media, youth subculture

1. Introduction

In the era of the internet, in addition to traditional face-to-face communication, online communication has become a popular option for social interaction between individuals. Online communication is not only a new option, but also an evolution of communication based on technology, networks, and social and intellectual progress. In today's rapidly developing new media environment, as more and more people become netizens, real faces are transformed into data and visual images in virtual self-spaces, and traditional language and thinking habits that were necessary for maintaining good communication are no longer essential in the face of this mysterious change in identity. Therefore, on the grand stage of social interaction, this transformation of the "performance" situation has given rise to more possibilities for individuals to present themselves and has provided new avenues for satisfying the different needs of different people. Based on the new environment of social media, our analysis of "self-presentation" is no longer limited to the ways in which people present themselves through language, gestures, behavior, and other means that stem from their real-life performances.

In the era of the internet, the theory of self-presentation has given rise to new directions worth considering. In light of the rise of youth subcultures on social media, this paper attempts to analyze the self-presentation of youth subculture groups on social media, using Weibo as an example, to supplement the gaps in relevant fields and provide possible perspectives for the study of social trends and their impact that are brought about by the emergence of new media environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Youth Subculture

Compared with traditional research objects, the study of youth subcultures in the new media environment has distinct characteristics of the internet. Since the 1990s, local youth subcultures in China have shown strong vitality and continued growth along with the development of internet technology, and have quickly emerged on network media. Meanwhile, research on network youth subcultures gradually emerged in China. This type of research analyzes the impact of network development on people from a macro perspective, focusing on the study of hacker culture and network language [1]. However, due to the perspective of mainstream ideology and limited development of youth subcultures, early research was relatively fragmented and tended to focus on the negative impact of network subcultures on the moral consciousness, thinking patterns, and physical and mental health of teenagers [2]. In recent years, various social media platforms have emerged, providing a broader platform for the emergence of new subculture events and attracting more complex hobbyists. With the popularity of network media, youth subcultures have undergone a shift from relatively closed “small groups” to the overall youth society [3]. Yang Xiaoliu and Zhou Yuanying used the concept of “subcultural capital” to study the relationship between youth subculture business and media interactions in the new media era [4]. In the study of youth subcultures and nationalism, Lin Pin believed that ACG enthusiasts have become a unified body of cultural production and consumption using digital media and network technology [5]. Network dissemination has expanded the influence of subcultures on other groups and mainstream culture, resulting in a more complex and flexible development of network youth subculture communities. Therefore, based on the development history of youth subculture research, objective analysis of the development achievements and characteristics of network youth subculture groups in the new media environment is the current trend of research.

2.2. Self-Presentation

Sociologist Erving Goffman proposed the concept of “self-presentation”, which has been widely used in research in the humanities and social sciences. The “self-presentation” theory, also known as dramaturgy or impression management, holds that in social interactions, people are like “performers” on a “stage”, choosing different ways to present themselves in order to shape their image for others. Therefore, society is like a big stage, and people need to clarify their roles and adjust their language, demeanor, and behavior according to different “situations”, choosing appropriate methods to better construct their roles and maintain their performances in front of the audience in specific situations [6]. In this process, “impression management” is the key to successfully establishing ideal connections with others in social performances.

When we enter the environment of new media, research has raised new questions about the “self-presentation” theory. Compared to traditional face-to-face communication, online social media exhibits characteristics of anonymity and liberalization, making role-playing and information understanding uncontrollable. Online social media breaks the limits of the “performance framework” in dramaturgy [7]. Furthermore, if we apply Goffman’s theory to the internet, if traditional face-to-face “self-presentation” is a daily performance, then “self-presentation” on social media is more like an “exhibition” [8]. Therefore, the rise of social media has led to the extension of research on “self-presentation” theory and its application to “online” interactions among various cultural groups on the internet. In China, popular social media platforms such as Weibo have become widespread among netizens due to their cross-text communication and pan-entertainment attributes. The situation created by the special communication framework of this type of social media satisfies different needs for self-

presentation of users [9]. In the study of virtual communities on platforms such as Weibo, Ma Zhongjun proposed that self-presentation in virtual communities is based on a community consensus, in order to obtain emotional and value recognition and establish a community culture [10]. Therefore, more and more young people are joining various cultural circles on social media, seeking a sense of belonging and expanding their cultural influence through online platforms. As the number of users rapidly increases, a large number of virtual communities are formed, creating unique cultural styles on the platform. If we use dramaturgy to explain this, the components of these social media cultural styles are jointly constructed by several collective performances, forming a large theater.

3. The Presenting Characteristics of Virtual Communities in Youth Subcultures

3.1. Self-Presentation with a Single Attribute

Compared to traditional performance-based self-presentation, self-presentation on social media has a longer duration and a wider audience that is not limited by time and location. People can freely design and change their online image, and manage their impressions through more convenient technological means. For example, on Weibo, users can select and set their profile picture, personal homepage, picture wall, and chat expressions for daily social interactions. Self-presentation on the internet has evolved from a stage performance to a self-exhibition, enhancing the manipulability of impression management in social media. People carefully consider and design their exhibitions, constantly strengthening the “giving” aspect of self-presentation and weakening the “revealing” aspect to better disguise themselves [11].

Based on the manipulability of impression management on social media, for the youth subculture group on the internet, which seeks identity and a sense of collective belonging in a unique environment separated from reality, strengthening the control over their self-image and weakening their real-life identity to maintain mystery is the basis for their choice of presenting themselves. In this context, youth subculture groups on Weibo, such as ACG enthusiasts and doll hobby circles, which are mainly composed of female participants, choose to create and cultivate social accounts with a single attribute. Such accounts often target a specific cultural circle, and their content and style revolve around that culture, while rejecting the presentation of any information unrelated to that attribute, thus creating an ideal and flawless social identity. These accounts often present similar attribute displays on their homepage, such as “expansion charts.” “Expansion charts” are long images that contain self-introductions of cultural attributes. They are used by some youth subculture groups as “pinned” content on their social media homepages and are promoted to attract people with the same attributes, making them the object of communication and mutual support on the internet.

The main influencing factors of users’ self-disclosure behavior on the internet are the evaluation and comparison of the benefits and costs of self-disclosure [12]. The self-disclosure cost of presenting a single attribute, similar to that of “expansion charts,” is relatively low for users. This is because choosing to present oneself with a single attribute on social media means that it does not involve more personal information or other hobbies. Therefore, the obstacle effect of “privacy concerns” in privacy protection issues on self-disclosure and self-presentation behavior is weakened [13]. It is precisely because of the presentation of a single attribute that people can participate more freely and boldly in the cultural social groups corresponding to that attribute. This rigorous and practical method is becoming increasingly popular in many youth subculture circles on the internet, causing a large number of similar graphic and text posts to appear in various cultural circles on social media. As a result, the boundaries between fans of the same culture become blurred, and the attribute of self-presentation becomes the basis for mutual recognition and cooperation among people. People from different backgrounds and identities can quickly integrate into and build virtual subcultures based on

the same “attribute declaration” while reducing potential disagreements with new audiences through their less distinguishable single attribute self-presentation.

3.2. Self-Presentation Language: Imitation and Entertainment

In virtual communities of young subcultures on social media, various internet jargon is rapidly produced and used. In this context, such language is not only used for daily communication, but more as a showcase of personal “cultural enthusiast identity” inundating self-presenting webpages. Subculture groups, including internet slang and daily message posting techniques that imitate sentence structures, are widely used to strengthen individual identities within the community. For example, in the ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture group, in Weibo’s “super topics” and online social groups, the phenomenon of “repeating” and “echoing” often occurs. This refers to the active copying, pasting, and publishing of information by other members after one member accidentally sends out a strongly cultural text or image information, resulting in dozens or hundreds of consecutive similar or identical information in a short period, forming a “repeater” effect. Some enthusiasts call this “the essence of humans is a repeater” (originally from a game “The Evolution of Trust”). This seemingly nonsensical imitation behavior actually helps users to harvest efficient online interaction in the simplest form, not only for entertainment but also to strengthen the identity of the community members. Sentence imitation, as a popular network parody, has strong explosive power [14]. The visual effects and ideological communication brought by copying and imitation are the effects created jointly by the special functions of network platforms and the network culture atmosphere. It can be said that the organic platform created by new media provides diverse elements for building cultural identity for network subcultures, endowing subculture groups with common symbols and meanings [15].

This imitation-enhanced self-control of social media language characteristics also promotes the entertainment of the self-presentation content of young subculture groups. In the process of discussing in virtual communities and making friends with people who share the same cultural interests, serious social topics and personal life complaints often break the fragile network relationship bond between users, leading to the breakdown of relationships. For users who choose to use accounts with a single cultural attribute, their self-presentation content focuses on promoting their own attributes and expressing their own emotions, using a large number of non-realistic images and texts that are rich in subculture group characteristics. They avoid displaying mainstream cultural information related to politics and other irrelevant personal survival experiences to others, and pay less attention to abstract system environments beyond the individual [16]. In this way, they seek to construct a simple subcultural “network identity” to socialize with a wide range of like-minded individuals in the cultural circle.

4. Driving Factors for Online Socialization of Youth Subcultures

4.1. Interaction on Social Media and Virtual Self-construction

According to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, the concept of “front stage” and “backstage” performance highlights the fact that in traditional face-to-face interactions, people may expose their “backstage” which is hidden from view in online social interactions. At the same time, the social media platform not only provides users with ample time to design and carefully consider the content they post, but also simplifies the backstage preparation process behind online self-presentation. The information that users carefully prepare and post on social media is saved on the webpage, allowing the performer to review their “performance” and make any necessary adjustments. This capability of social media extends the long-term impact of self-presentation on interaction and increases the utilization rate of self-presentation. In the new media environment, youth subcultures can use the

cultural attributes of the information they have published since their account was established to construct an “identity” for their account, and based on this “identity,” develop a personal language and behavioral style. When new audiences discover and enter their homepage through online subcultural communities, they only need to interact in the comment section or chat box based on the information they already have, without the need to repeatedly perform from scratch.

These social media-based socialization methods break free from the limitations of traditional impression management. From the perspective of “identity,” the account construction mechanism of social media provides a quick channel for youth subcultures to participate or withdraw from online socialization freely. This is because in the virtual space of the internet, due to the lack of material interest relationships, the psychological pressure when socializing is relatively small, and their “identity” can be constantly transformed for their own social practice needs, and they can engage in role-playing in the online world [17]. In the process of interaction on social media, youth subcultures can no longer focus on the influence of their real-life identity on online socialization, but can recognize each other based on their virtual “identity” and evaluate each other based on the same cultural interests. They can transform from “strangers” offline to “virtual identities” online, logging into multiple platforms and switching accounts to manage different subcultural communities’ “virtual selves.” The convenience brought by social media encourages youth subculture groups to use online media more boldly to perform their cultural interests, which they may find difficult to achieve in real life, in order to achieve effective socialization and a sense of belonging and identity.

4.2. “Anti-Spiral of Silence” in Social-Media

With the popularity of online social and virtual communities, the definition of public places has changed. Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann’s concept of the “Spiral of Silence” in offline contexts has sparked much discussion about whether it also exists in the online space. In response, many scholars have proposed the concept of the “Anti-Spiral of Silence” based on phenomena observed on social media platforms. In research on the dissemination of information on Weibo, freedom of expression in the digital age exhibits characteristics of boundlessness, anonymity, and equality [18]. When creators and recipients of information interact with each other, the influence of mainstream media and mainstream thoughts weakens. Thus, a minority group with different opinions may successfully change the direction of public opinion, and have their views accepted by more people [19].

Although the “Spiral of Silence” is not as prevalent in the new era, it has not become obsolete on the internet. The motivation for social isolation and fear is based on social psychology, so even though the conditions for social isolation and fear are weakened on social media, people still fear being isolated [20]. As for the emergence of the “Anti-Spiral of Silence”, its driving force is the reduced possibility of social isolation and fear in the online space, which also reduces the cost of expressing one’s opinions. The internet allows hard core members to quickly find like-minded people and expand their influence in virtual communities. At the same time, users are more aware of creating information with virtual identities, and the speed of information dissemination on social media is enhanced [21]. Through the internet, users can quickly and effectively interact, while having the opportunity to become influential the hard core in various contexts of information dissemination. Based on the anonymity of real identities and the flexibility of virtual identities on social media, they dare to express their opinions different from others to gain more recognition and support. Therefore, even from the perspective of the youth subculture virtual community, social isolation and fear still exist. But when we distinguish between subculture and mainstream culture, in social media, the youth subculture group, as the main group holding minority opinions, is more active in expressing their views in the online space, and forming a self-presentation style with cultural characteristics to increase collective cohesion and recognition, attract peers to form a group with increasing influence, and ultimately promote the output and prosperity of subcultures.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The main characteristics of self-presentation in the social media of young subcultural groups are reflected in two aspects: self-presentation strategies and content style. To enhance self-shaping and control impression management, some young subculture groups' social media accounts present a single attribute. With specialized and disconnected presentation content from real life, subculture enthusiasts effectively create personal exhibition homepages that are favorable for their participation in community communication and making friends. In terms of presentation style, the network communication characteristics of young subculture groups are concentrated in "echo chamber" speech and mutual imitation of collective interaction. By repeating others' subculture-style texts or images, social community sense and sense of belonging are strengthened while quickly integrating into others.

The virtual community of young subcultures is growing, and the organic environment of new media creates an ideal virtual space for subculture development. The functions and possibilities provided by social media platforms bring an extension of human ability. The special dissemination mechanism of social media and constantly updating usage methods expand and simplify the stage of self-presentation. Communication on the screen breaks through the limitations of traditional offline socializing, and the manipulability and convenience of impression management bring prosperity to the interaction of the network subculture community.

Due to the limited observation scope, the conclusions drawn in this article may not apply to all internet young subculture communities and enthusiasts. The self-presentation characteristics of enthusiasts of high-concentration ACG culture and its derivative subcultures may be unfamiliar to some peripheral participants. Therefore, the distinct self-presentation content and patterns formed by the core group of young subculture in social media can be a direction of thinking for future research on newcomers and other groups in social media. The intersection between young subculture groups and other groups in network communication and their mutual impact on self-presentation patterns are also worth further research.

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