

Authenticity and Performance: An Analysis of the Influence of Strong and Weak Relationships on Users' Self-Presentation in Social Media

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Abstract: The rise of online social media has led to a shift in people's social interactions from offline to online platforms. Online social interaction has become an integral part of societal interactions. Platforms like WeChat Moments and Tik Tok offer distinctive social channels, providing a platform with a more diverse audience. As a result, individuals can present their performances to audiences with different levels of relationship strength. This paper aims to explore the differences in self-presentation motivations and strategies when facing audiences with different levels of relationship strength on WeChat Moments and Tik Tok. This paper analyzes the impact of relationship strength on self-presentation, exploring the influence of strong and weak relationships on college students' self-presentation in social media. Based on the survey and interview results, the paper compares the differences and connections in self-presentation of college students on WeChat Moments and Tik Tok. The findings indicate that the images users present on social media are closely related to their relationship with the audience. Users adjust their self-presentation strategies based on the composition ratio of strong and weak relationships in the social platform. Furthermore, users perform different degrees of impression management, presenting different levels of authenticity. Users also assign different levels of importance to different audiences and adopt different image correction strategies based on the level of importance. Moreover, in response to the findings of the study, the paper highlights the problems that exist in social media interaction and makes targeted recommendations for the development of online social interaction.

Keywords: dramaturgy theory, social media, strong relationship, weak relationship

1. Introduction

With the development of new media, online social media has become an indispensable part of people's daily life, providing people with a stage for communication and self-expression. The hyperspace and time of the Internet have broken the boundaries of time and space between audiences, making the audience people interact with more extensive and diverse. In the face of many different audiences in the virtual arena, people will also adopt different ways to present themselves and interact with them.

In this paper, on the basis of combing the related literature at home and abroad, taking WeChat Moments and Tik Tok as examples, the author uses the research methods of questionnaire and interview to investigate the influence of strong and weak relationships in online social platforms on users' self-representation, as well as to understand their motives of self-representation in online social media and the problems they encounter in the process of using them, so as to make suggestions for the development of online social.

2. Research Method

This paper mainly adopts questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews as the main research methods to compare the differences and connections between college students' self-presentation in WeChat Moments and Tik Tok, and to investigate the influence of strong relationships and weak relationships on college students' self-presentation in social media.

2.1. Survey Subjects

The university students are the main target of this study. Since this study cannot fully include all the university students over the country, the university students in Chongqing, Inner Mongolia, and Beijing were mainly selected for online questionnaire distribution, and the Random sampling method was used to select the valid questionnaires to composite the sample.

2.2. Questionnaire Survey

2.2.1. The Selection and Design of the Questionnaire

In the questionnaire design stage, the actual situation in daily life and reference to relevant papers were combined to complete the questionnaire design, and the questionnaire was mainly divided into three parts. The first part is mainly about demographic-related questions, investigating the gender and grade of the research subjects and other basic personal information, so as to screen out the research subjects who use both WeChat Moments and Tik Tok. The second and third parts are surveys on the use of WeChat Moments and Tik Tok among college students. Firstly, the author investigates the number of friends (fans) and the composition of friends (fans) of college students on these two platforms to clarify the proportion of strong and weak relationships among college students on these two platforms. Secondly, by investigating the frequency, reason, form, content, and emotion presented in the contents of these two platforms, the basic portrait of college students' self-presentation in these two social platforms was depicted. Then, in order to investigate whether the college students had an awareness of audience separation when using these two platforms, and to compare the different influences of strong and weak relationships on the college students' self-presentation in social media, the author investigates whether the college students group and block their friends and set visibility permissions when using WeChat Moments, whether they want their real friends to follow their Tik Tok accounts, and whether they embellish the content when posting content. Finally, by directly asking the research subjects about the effects of these two social platforms on their social relationships and the troubles they encountered during the use of these platforms, the problems of interaction and self-presentation in the social media were revealed, so that suggestions and improvement solutions could be made for the use problems in the future.

2.2.2. Questionnaire Implementation and Recovery

After the questionnaire was designed, it was mainly distributed through "Questionnaire Star" to conduct online research, and the total length of distribution was three days.

2.3. In-depth Interview

2.3.1. Interview Subjects

After the questionnaires were distributed and collected, the author was puzzled by some discrepancies between some of the data results and the expected results. Therefore, the author selected ten students of different genders and grades to conduct in-depth interviews, so as to understand their ideas more deeply, making up for the shortcomings in the questionnaire, and answer the questions that were not presented in the questionnaire.

2.3.2. Outline of the Interview

The interview was conducted with “semi-open-ended” questions, mainly about “Which platform do you think you can show your true self more and why? Do you have any concerns about the content you post because there are too many acquaintances on social media platforms? Do you care more about the impressions of your acquaintances or strangers?” By comparing the different psychological states of the research subjects during the use of WeChat and Tik Tok, the different effects of strong relationships and weak relationships on self-presentation and social relationships were also compared.

2.3.3. Interview Method

The interviews were conducted mainly by a combination of offline face-to-face communication and online WeChat communications. Each research subject was interviewed for about twenty minutes. In order not to disturb the research subjects, the offline interview was recorded by audio recording without informing them of the purpose of the interview, and the online interview was recorded via Chat history. Then the content was sorted out immediately after the interview to ensure the integrity and validity of the data.

3. Result

3.1. Differences in Audience Composition on WeChat Moments and Tik Tok

In a survey of 75 participants, 81.4% of respondents stated that their WeChat Moments were primarily composed of strong relationships such as classmates, colleagues, family, and friends, while only 18.6% were people they knew but weren't familiar with or strangers. In contrast, the proportion of fans who were strangers on Tik Tok was as high as 29.7%. This shows that the audience on WeChat Moments is mainly made up of strong relationships, while the audience on Tik Tok is mainly made up of weak relationships.

3.2. Performance Strategies on Social Platforms

When asked about self-presentation, the survey results showed that there were many similarities in the motivation for role-playing on both WeChat Moments and Tik Tok. For example, regardless of the platform, users who perform have a strong desire for self-presentation and hope to build an idealized image through performance on social platforms. In terms of “emotional tendencies in content posting”, 65.06% of WeChat Moments users and 73.33% of Tik Tok users showed positive emotions mostly in their content. Regarding the question of whether they would “beautify” their content (such as editing photos or videos), 59.04% of WeChat Moments users said they would occasionally beautify their content, and 28.92% would habitually do so. Among Tik Tok users, 41.67% said they would occasionally beautify their content, and 38.33% said they would habitually do so.

When asked about audience segregation, the survey data showed that as many as 75.9% of users would group their contacts when using WeChat, indicating that users consciously separate their audience. As figure 1 shows, more than two-thirds of the respondents said that when there are too many acquaintances on social platforms, they would be more concerned about whether their content is appropriate, and they would care more about how their acquaintances perceive their image compared to strangers. About “the reason for grouping,” 58.73% of users said that they group their contacts on WeChat because their content is only relevant to a specific group, and they would block those who cannot resonate with their content. On Tik Tok, users often add relevant topics to their videos to target people interested in those topics more precisely, achieving audience segregation. The interview results were consistent with the survey results, showing that users often divide their audience into different parts through friend groups, permission settings, and friend blocking, presenting different content that is easily resonated with by different audiences to avoid misunderstandings that may damage their self-image.

Regarding questions related to audience segregation, survey data showed that as many as 75.9% of users would group their friends on WeChat, indicating that users consciously segregate their audience. More than two-thirds of respondents said that when they have too many acquaintances on social media, they become concerned about whether their content is appropriate. They are also more concerned about the opinions of their acquaintances on their image compared to strangers. As for the “reasons for grouping,” 58.73% of users said that they group their friends on WeChat because their content is only intended for a specific group of audience. They would therefore block those who could not relate to their content. On Tik Tok, users often add hashtags to their own content so that the platform can more accurately push their videos to people interested in that topic, thus achieving audience segregation. The interview results also correspond with those of the survey, as users often divide their audience into different parts through friend grouping, permission settings, and friend blocking. They present different content aiming at creating “perceived similarity” with different audiences to avoid misunderstandings and damage to their self-image. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and purposes behind user audience isolation, researchers conducted further interviews and obtained the following answers:

“I once posted a sarcastic post on my WeChat Moments, but my teacher misunderstood it as a complaint about the school, which gave the teacher a bad impression of me.” (Interviewee Z)

“Sometimes the content I post on WeChat Moments reveals my current location, residence, and other personal information. At this time, I will block some unfamiliar people to avoid privacy leaks.” (Interviewee G)

“I don’t like to post too much about my personal life on Tik Tok. Tik Tok always pushes videos to nearby people, and sometimes my teachers and classmates see them, which causes unnecessary trouble.” (Interviewee Y)

“I’ve met many new friends with similar interests on Tik Tok. Sometimes I only share some of the content I post on Tik Tok with them.” (Interviewee Y)

“There are good and bad strangers on, Tik Tok and most of them don’t participate in my real life. Their comments have no practical impact on my life, so I don’t care too much about what they think of me.” (Interviewee W)

When asked about impression management-related issues, 85.54% of users who post on WeChat Moments do so to record or share their lives. Emotions, status, and thoughts which can only be truly displayed at the “back stage” in reality have become important contents for displaying on WeChat Moments. In response to the question of whether users would have concerns about posting content due to having too many acquaintances on social media platforms, 65.88% of respondents chose “yes.” At the same time, the survey found that compared to Tik Tok, users have lower levels of impression

management on WeChat Moments, and are more willing to show their true thoughts and feelings on WeChat Moments. In response to this result, the author asked interviewees for their opinions.

“In WeChat Moments, everyone is familiar with each other, and they know what kind of person I am, so I don’t need to deliberately package myself. Excessive decoration will make them think I’m not genuine.” (Interviewee L)

“I think I am more real in my WeChat Moments because most people on Tik Tok are glamorous and I don’t want them to see my embarrassing side. Sometimes showing my true self on Tik Tok will attract some negative comments.” (Interviewee T)

Therefore, it can be seen that the different composition of strong and weak relationships on social media platforms results in different levels of impression management.

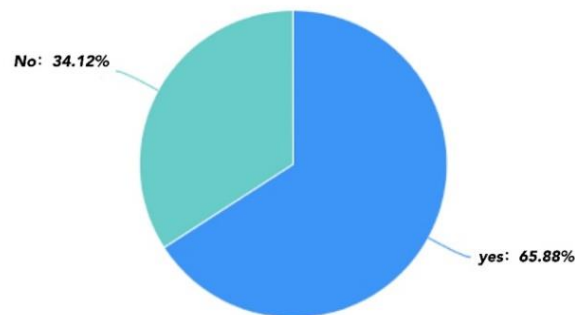


Figure 1: Whether they will concern about whether their content is appropriate if there are too many acquaintances on social media.

4. Discussion

As the American sociologist and economist M. Granovetter has pointed out, social relationships can be classified into strong relationships, characterized by a similar social nature and close connections, and weak relationships, characterized by significant differences in social nature and loose connections [1]. This shows that in people’s daily lives, social relationships with frequent interactions, such as family members and close friends, are strong relationships, while social relationships with less interaction in real life, such as online friends, are weak relationships. By comparing and analyzing the data from the questionnaire results on “WeChat friend composition” and “Tik Tok fan composition” and combining it with actual life, the author has found that WeChat Moments is a stage for performing in front of acquaintances, and the audience in Moments is mainly composed of familiar people know well and have a closer relationship with, with strong relationships being an important link connecting performers and audiences. In contrast, on Tik Tok, the viewers who watch the performance are influenced by the algorithm push mechanism, and the performers often face thousands of strangers, with weak relationships being the main composition of Tik Tok’s social relationships. The degree of closeness of the relationship with the audience is also an important factor affecting the performer’s self-presentation strategy.

4.1. Presenting the Ideal Image – “A Carefully Staged Perfect Self”

Katz’s “uses and gratifications” theory points out that when audiences use media, they are driven by certain psychological motivations or needs [2]. In social media, the “uses and gratifications” of self-presentation as performers are reflected in the kind of image that users hope to shape on the social media stage and what emotional or material benefits such an image can bring them.

Whether the audience is composed of strong or weak relationships, performers will choose the content of their self-presentation to meet their needs for constructing their “image” and highlight their positive aspects. During the process of self-presentation, users can also learn about how others view them through interactions such as comments and likes from their friends (fans) and compare this with their ideal self, constantly refining their presented image to create a “perfect self” [3]. The indirect nature of social platforms allows performers to more easily control their image, presenting a carefully packaged image on the “front stage” according to their own wishes, while their most authentic and unknown parts are hidden in the “backstage” behind their phones.

Regarding the difference in the impact of strong and weak relationships on users’ self-presentation, the survey found that on the Tik Tok platform, where weak relationships are dominant, performers mostly face strangers with low levels of understanding of them. Therefore, compared to WeChat Moments, where there are more strong relationships, performers on Tik Tok tend to “beautify” their content more in order to satisfy their vanity or attract attention.

4.2. Audience Isolation Strategy ----- “Segmented Image Presentation”

Goffman’s concept of “audience isolation” suggests that performers’ performances are targeted, and they do not want their established performance script to be disrupted by sudden intrusions of uninvited guests, so they consciously isolate the audience [4].

Audience segregation also exists in WeChat Moment and Tik Tok. In a “cue-reduced environment”, some of our emotions and content on social platforms such as WeChat Moment and Tik Tok are often not accurately conveyed to the audience due to the limitations of technology and the lack of specific context in our self-presentation. In such a Cue-reduced environment, some of the emotions and content on social platforms are often not accurately conveyed to the audience. Users want to express themselves on social platforms, but they are afraid of misunderstanding, so they isolate part of the audience to reduce the risk of image damage [5]. The fear of privacy leakage is one of the important reasons why some users segregate their audience. Due to the different familiarity and closeness with friends on social media, people cannot be sure that every audience is reliable, so they choose to block some less credible viewers for their own protection. At the same time, in online social media, people tend to look for community with the same interests as their own, establishing some kind of “psychological community”. On the contrary, viewers who do not understand the interests would be consciously isolated [6].

Whether the audience is identifiable and whether the audience can be segregated is a prerequisite for the success of audience segregation, so the difficulty and strategy of audience segregation varies across social platforms [4]. In WeChat, people have a general understanding of their added friends, and they only need to add tags for them when adding friends to quickly complete the grouping, and they can more easily identify who their audience is and segregate them. However, in Tik Tok, their audience is determined by the algorithm, which is random and unidentifiable, thus making audience segregation more difficult.

In addition, the basis of audience segregation is different on different platforms. In WeChat Moment, audience segregation is mostly based on real-life relationships, such as relatives, friends, teachers, etc. In Tik Tok, since the audience has a weak tie with people, they segregate their audience based on their own interests and segregate those who do not share the same interests with them.

This shows that whether people face strong or weak relationships, they consciously segregate their audience so as to better shape their self-image. However, they can segregate audiences more effectively in strong relationships because they know them better, and it is more difficult to segregate audiences in weak relationships.

4.3. The “Foregrounding” of Backstage---“The Revealed Inner Monologue”

Goffman’s theory of “front-stage/back-stage” divides people’s daily performance into two parts: the front stage and the backstage. The front stage is where people use symbols to present themselves to the audience, crafting an image that aligns with the role they want to play. This image is carefully constructed, and the audience sees a perfectly designed character rather than their real selves. The backstage is a more private domain that is difficult for the audience to access, where performers avoid exposing their backstage behavior to maintain their image [4]. On virtual social platforms such as WeChat Moments and Tik Tok, the performance behavior of front-stage and back-stage has new characteristics.

WeChat Moments mainly focuses on strong relationships with the feature of indirect and high familiarity with friends. This provides an opportunity for the audience to remove their masks and show their true selves. The originally hidden “backstage” part has been brought to the front stage of the WeChat Moments, and the boundary between the front stage and backstage is gradually blurring. By sacrificing some privacy in the backstage, users can allow more viewers to participate in their lives independently. “Privacy” becomes material for interaction with the audience. Users hope to gain positive experiences through likes and comments, strengthen their connections with friends, and gain more attention and support.

Unlike WeChat Moments, Tik Tok is mainly based on weak relationships, and its connection with reality is looser. People can show more “backstage” without hesitation and pursue the pleasure of breaking free from front-stage restrictions. Numerous interactions, such as likes and collections from weak relationships, also provide positive motivation for performers, stimulating them to present more “backstage” to the audience [7].

When facing strong relationships, users may have concerns about the negative effects of having too many acquaintances. However, the high reliability of strong relationships also reduces our concerns about privacy leakage. Additionally, because there are actual contacts in reality, some attitudes and thoughts in the “backstage” can receive timely feedback, and the continuity of interaction is also stronger, thereby stimulating the degree of “backstage-front-stage”. Compared with strong relationships, weak relationships provide users with a free expression field, but due to the lack of a common context, users cannot ensure that their “backstage” is widely understood and accepted, and there is a risk of privacy leakage. Therefore, the “foregrounding” of backstage is lower.

4.4. The Influence of Social Interaction

With frequent interactions, some weak relationships may continue to strengthen and become strong relationships, while some existing “strong relationships” may also have the potential to weaken [6]. Users of social platforms like WeChat Moments or Tik Tok have a subjective desire for social interaction. Social platforms enable us to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries and enhance mutual understanding through various forms of interaction, thereby consolidating and extending social relationships and increasing social capital. Charles Horton Cooley has pointed out that self-expression is one of humanity’s innate emotions [8]. Online social platforms also provide us with a platform for self-expression, emotional expression, and venting, and enable the users obtain information and satisfy their entertainment needs during the usage process.

A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) indicates that excessive use of social media not only does not bring users a sense of relaxation, but actually increases stress and anxiety and has a negative impact [9]. While social platforms bring us social convenience, they also bring many challenges. Excessive self-exposure not only poses a risk of privacy leakage but also causes users to be addicted to the “carnival” of virtual social interaction and become self-enclosed in real life, with a decreasing desire to communicate in reality, becoming “container people” with media

sequelae, which can do harm to physical and mental health [10]. At the same time, the overload of performative information can make users live in the shadow of others' exquisite images, and ubiquitous comparisons can also bring us troubles and psychological burdens. The extreme performance atmosphere can also make users lose themselves, and users increasingly rely on "masks" to maintain their existence in both the online and real worlds [9]. Under this atmosphere, the pressure of "negative social comparison" and "impression management" also makes us lose the ability to "be negative and be ourselves," and we lose our original intention to use social platforms [11].

4.5. Suggestions

According to data from the Pew Research Center, 49% of smartphone users are escaping social media, and 41% are using applications that automatically delete sent messages [8]. Faced with the various challenges brought by social platforms, users themselves, platform developers, and relevant departments should take corresponding measures to jointly solve the problems that exist. First of all, users should reasonably choose the information on social platforms and view others and their own image with a more rational eye. Users should also have a reasonable plan for the duration of their use of social platforms to avoid excessive immersion in virtual social interaction and squeezing out real-life interactions. Users should also establish an awareness of privacy protection and not only try to reveal as little personal information as possible but also confirm whether the opening of some permissions used in the platform will lead to privacy leakage in a timely manner. Secondly, platform developers should regulate their own privacy collection behaviors towards users and provide users with a more secure and reliable network social environment. At the same time, platforms should provide more diverse and personalized ways of interaction, based on meeting users' emotional demands, provide targeted solutions to problems encountered by users, and enhance users' satisfaction and experience. Finally, relevant departments should improve relevant privacy protection policies, regulate and guide the content on the platform to avoid the spread of malicious content and the proliferation of unscrupulous behavior.

5. Conclusion

The rise of social platforms allows users to effortlessly navigate between strong and weak relationships, presenting their idealized selves to their audience, and adjusting their performance strategies based on the different levels of their relationship with them. The entertaining and virtual nature of social platforms also enables performers to enjoy a gratifying sense of experience while "performing" and achieve the maintenance and accumulation of social capital. However, the issues of privacy leakage and media sequelae that exist cannot be ignored.

This paper has some shortcomings. Firstly, the design of the survey and interview questionnaire is highly repetitive, and some questions lack relevance, rendering them unable to support research questions. Secondly, the study subjects' scope is too limited, focusing primarily on college students for questionnaire distribution and interviews, and neglecting research on other age groups, professions, and populations. In future research, researchers should concentrate on the problems of self-presentation in current social platforms, exploring ways to strike a balance between virtual and real self-presentation, and making virtual social relationships a helpful supplement to actual relationships.

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