

Understanding Collective Gaze in Social Media

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Abstract: Based on the previous Panopticon theory, this paper proposes new perspectives to observe the gazing behaviors on social media, attempting to regard the onlookers as the gazers who watch and judge specific social issues in cyberspace. To explore the culture and behavioral characteristics of the gazers, this paper resorts to the Virtual Ethnography research method to construct a feasible interpretative model to understand and describe the definition of the collective gaze. This paper finds a dynamic relationship between the gazers and the gazees being gazed at, which can help figure out the mechanisms of the collective gaze, including the motivation of the gazing behaviors and the communication channels among the gazers. In addition, this paper finds that the impacts exerted by the collective gaze are quite complex after quantitative and qualitative analysis of the statistical data, images, and textual information obtained during the research. Overall, this paper provides a reasonable and understandable description of the new media landscape on social media brought by the collective gaze.

Keywords: panopticon, social media, collective gaze, gazing behaviors, virtual ethnography

1. Introduction

In the context of the intertwined and coexisting era of Web2.0 and Web3.0, the media society is gradually maturing, and with the continuous development of global social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, social networks all over the world have become flatter, more diverse and more complex [1]. More and more internet users are establishing normalized social networks on social media. Against the background above, gazing at specific social individuals and their behaviors is becoming increasingly common. In semantics, “gaze” mainly refers to the relationship between “seeing” and “being seen,” and that also means the relationship between the gazer and the gazee being gazed at. French philosopher Michel Foucault once described a “Panopticon” in *Discipline and Punishment*, meaning that the observer at the center of the circle can gaze at all prisoners. At the same time, the monitored person cannot determine whether they have been gazed at [2]. As a result, the criminals gazed at will feel lonely and imprisoned, thus forming the effect of self-imprisonment and self-discipline. In the mid to late 20th century, the concepts of “male gaze” and “female gaze” emerged one after another, and they mainly advocated constructing self-identity cognition from the gender perspective [3].

From the age of keeping records by tying knots to passing from mouth to mouth and from printing to the electronic age, people kept gazing at specific phenomena in different ways [4]. In the past, due to the immaturity of the communication environment and the information differences

between different groups, it took much work to form a large-scale collective gaze. However, in the interconnected world built by the Internet of Things and the Internet, the ubiquitous cameras, sensors, and communication tools will constantly intercept, replicate, and amplify social reality [5]. It is no exaggeration to say that people constantly gaze at the world and others. At the same time, they are constantly being gazed at, which means that the collective gaze is becoming increasingly common and never stops. Therefore, it is necessary and meaningful to expand the research scope of the gazers based on the previous Panopticon theory, attempt to view gazers as groups with unique cultural and behavioral characteristics, and explore the phenomenon of collective gaze in social media. With the continuous expansion of the user communities of the short video social media platform TikTok, it has gradually become an essential arena for the collective gaze. In other words, Internet users are gazing at major social issues through this window [6]. In recent years, short video works about disclosing social irregularities have repeatedly been listed on the popular search list on the platform and attracted wide attention and discussion from all walks of life. Undoubtedly, gazing behaviors in the era of social media usually have unique characteristics and patterns. Although in a fragmented reading mode, the public often wanders in cyberspace at a loss, and their focus is distracted, their attention will immediately shift and converge upon the call of specific issues [7]. That means certain roles or behaviors in these issues will object to the “collective gaze,” the public will conduct gazing behaviors mainly through digital methods such as likes, comment forwarding, and secondary creation, ultimately forming a collective gaze. This kind of collective gaze does not bring actual violence or mandatory punishment but instead spreads and strengthens social pressure through constant circulation on social media. After a period of repetition, the communication effects brought about by the collective gaze may be normalized into specific social rules that require unconditional obedience, ultimately throwing an implicit but real constraint that affects members of society from the spiritual and behavioral dimensions, even forming oppression.

Accordingly, this paper takes root in the short video social media platform TikTok, carries out Virtual Ethnography research on collective gaze focusing on social irregularities, captures and amplifies collective gaze cases on the platform, and conducts descriptive analysis on the specific situation of collective gaze by combining in-depth interviews and text analysis, to deeply understand and interpret the definition and characteristics of collective gaze, annotating the dynamic relationship between the gazes, the gazers and their gazing behaviors through the combination of quantitative research and qualitative research. In addition, the paper appropriately explores the relevant impacts of the collective gaze, intending to contribute to the research directions of other research teams and the operational mechanisms of relevant media platforms.

The research results show that gazers with their information preferences and media contact habits usually have normalized their social networks on social media platforms. Their attention and discussion on specific social issues can form a scene of gathering and watching, which is also proliferating on social media. During the communication process, these onlookers with different purposes gaze at specific individuals based on their existing and distinct positions and attitudes, and their sight may shift and even lose focus around the objects being gazed at, resulting in different impacts, including negative impacts like online violence. It is worth noting that gazing behaviors occur between the gazers and the gazes and accompany the path of the collective gaze within the groups of gazers. In addition, some regularities, and characteristics of the dynamic relationship between the gazers and the gazes highly deserve deeper discussion and consideration.

2. Method

The construction of the interpretive model for collective gaze mainly revolves around the keywords, including the gazers, the gazes, and the gazing behaviors. Then, this paper combines the gaze in the traditional scene described by the Panopticon theory with the operating rules and characteristics of

online social media platforms in cyberspace, firstly making the following assumptions regarding the collective gaze on social media. These four assumptions mainly attempt to interpret and describe the definitions and characteristics of the gazers, the gazes, and the gazing behaviors, and they may effectively guarantee and promote the research process.

2.1. Hypothesis

Assumption 1. The objects of the collective gaze, the individuals or their behaviors being gazed at, usually possess sociality and popularity. It means the gazers can easily cause widespread communication and discussion, especially in social events with distinct positions of right and wrong, good, and evil, which can often raise many onlookers quickly.

Assumption 2. The gazers conducting gazing behaviors usually have their predetermined attitude tendency. That is, their existing positions and viewpoints are relatively difficult to change, and most of them judge and gaze at the gazes from the stance of a kind of subjective justice. In addition, according to the differences in dominance of the gazing behaviors, the gazers can be divided into the explicit and invisible gazers.

Assumption 3. Gazing behaviors in cyberspace are often unstable and transferable, especially in the open environment on social media. The speed and scope of the collective gaze can be infinitely expanded, and the sight of the virtual public will shift or even totally deviate from the center of the original gazes.

Assumption 4. There is synchronicity between the gazers and the gazes, which means that changes in the former can usually cause changes in the latter to a certain extent. Besides, these changes are mainly reflected in changes in discussions and attitudes, although there often exists a certain lag in this synchronicity.

2.2. Virtual Ethnography

Because the research objects and their activities are in the communication situation of the Internet, this paper mainly resorts to the study method of Virtual Ethnography to conduct field research on the short video social media TikTok and uses participatory observation and in-depth interviews to explore the culture and activities of the gazers group. Virtual Ethnography is the adjustment and extension of traditional Ethnography research methods in the network environment. Because the virtual environment of the Internet is different from the living space of real society, and the traditional research methods are insufficient in applicability, some scholars began to explore the use of the Internet as a new research field and tool at the beginning of the twenty-first century and thus proposed the Virtual Ethnography method to explore some social and cultural phenomena related to the Internet [8]. Therefore, based on the above content, it is reasonable and feasible to use Virtual Ethnography to explore the collective gaze phenomenon on social media platforms and understand and describe the mechanism of the gazing behaviors. The research by Virtual Ethnography in this paper is mainly conducted during the development and communication period of the social issue “The Affair of State-owned Enterprise Leader.” Further, it explores the collective gaze by observing short video works and the related publishing accounts that disclose and discuss this social non-standard behavior on TikTok, and the measures are as follows.

2.3. Select Field Range

As a rapidly rising short video social media platform all over the world, the user group of TikTok is constantly expanding. It gathers various discourse forces such as government agencies, news media, and online celebrities and covers various fields such as politics, economy, education, and people’s livelihood. TikTok has gradually become one of the most important arenas for communicating and

discussing social issues, including disclosing specific non-standard social phenomena and behaviors. In simple terms, TikTok has become a critical “window” for the collective gaze. Non-standard social phenomena and behaviors related to food safety, violent conflict, and moral anomie have repeatedly been listed on the trending list on the TikTok platform, raising widespread attention and discussion. Since June 7, 2023, a street-shot short video revealing the scandal of a state-owned enterprise leader has caught traction on TikTok. The popularity of related topics such as “The Affair of State-owned Enterprise Leader” has topped the trending list. This paper focuses on the related short video works with high views and popularity and conducts participatory observation with an average of two hours per day for one month.

2.4. Field Observation

During the field observation, this paper focuses on the TikTok platform from 12:00 to 13:00 and from 20:00 to 21:00 daily. This is broadly consistent with the media contact habits of online users and the activity characteristics of platform users. On June 7, 2023, a street shot short video about a state-owned enterprise leader and a young woman holding hands in Taikoo Li, Chengdu, China, was widely spread on TikTok and highly heated, causing widespread discussion among users throughout the network. According to platform data, approximately 501 short video accounts, including 88 official accounts and 413 business media accounts, have posted about 707 related short video works, among which nearly 9700 comments under the short video with the most view volume is collected. This paper attempts to observe the developments and changes in video communication patterns by anonymously following and discussing these short video works and their publishing accounts. At the same time, this paper conducts the participatory observation mainly through digital interactive methods such as forwarding, commenting, and clicking on “likes” to deeply engage in the scene of the collective gaze and interact with other gazers. To select 20 active TikTok users as the representatives of the gazers conducting gazing behaviors for the in-depth interview, this paper links to these TikTok users by following top reviews, replying, private messages, and other means.

2.5. In-depth Interview

Conducting in-depth interviews is crucial to obtaining textual information in Virtual Ethnography. It is a qualitative research method that refers to researchers collecting first-hand information from study subjects through conversations, making researchers more comprehensively and intuitively understand and describe the research topic [9]. Therefore, after conducting the one-month-long participatory observation, this paper selects 20 representative TikTok users as the representatives of the gazers who engage in the collective gaze on social media and conduct open and in-depth interviews based on the proposed interview outline. The questions in the interview outline aim to analyze the media contact habits of the gazers, clarify the mechanism of the collective gaze, such as the motivation and formation process of gazing behaviors, and the gazers’ understanding and recognition towards the gazes and their behaviors. During the interviewing process, the questions in the outline will be flexible according to specific circumstances. In addition, these 20 interviewees are all active users of the TikTok platform, and they are reasonably and comprehensively distributed in gender, age, occupation, and other demographic characteristics as far as possible. For example, in terms of profession, the interviewees mainly cover college students, teachers, civil servants, journalists, personal media creators, advertising, public relations, e-commerce trade, full-time homemakers, freelancers, and other social groups.

2.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis is necessary for data processing and theoretical construction after conducting field research and in-depth interviews in Virtual Ethnography [10]. First, this paper conducts a quantitative and comparative analysis of the images and text data obtained during the participatory observation, which aims to explore the characteristics of the collective gaze. After conducting in-depth interviews with 20 interviewees, this paper conducts content and text analysis on the collected textual content. That also combines the environmental background of TikTok with the analysis of the personal information of the interviewers, including their media contact habits and social networks normalized on the platform. Moreover, this paper analyzes the behavioral characteristics of the gazers and the gazes, trying to improve the interpretative model of the collective gaze to discuss the above assumptions better. The conclusions obtained through this analysis had better verify the assumptions' validity and extract new viewpoints with favorable arguments. Besides, the section focuses on the attitudes of gazers towards social irregularities to further understand and describe the motivation of gazing behaviors, and that also helps refine the core definition of the collective gaze. At the same time, a descriptive analysis of the potential impacts of the gazing behaviors will be conducted to provide some feasible suggestions to social media platforms and relevant regulatory authorities.

3. Experiment Results and Analysis

3.1. Data Description

During the participatory observation, this paper found that since the topic and the terms related to "The Affair of State-owned Enterprise Leader" were repeatedly listed on the trending list on the TikTok platform on June 7, 2023, about 501 short video accounts were released approximately 707 short videos to introduce, reproduce and discuss this non-standard social scandal. Among these short video accounts, 88 are official accounts, including mainstream media and local government media organizations such as People's Daily, The Paper, and Hong Kong Satellite TV, accounting for about 18%. At the same time, the rest are commercial media agencies and media creators, accounting for about 82%. Among the 707 short video works, 162 were published by official accounts, accounting for approximately 23%, while the rest were published by non-official accounts, accounting for approximately 77%.

Then, this paper engages in participatory observation through interactive methods, mainly focusing on several short videos with relatively high views. After selecting and extracting textual information from the comment areas of the highly discussed short video, this paper obtains about 9710 valid comment texts.

After participatory observation, this paper selects 20 representative TikTok users and conducts interviews with them according to the proposed interview outline. Among the 20 interviewees, 12 were female, and eight were male. Regarding the age of these interviewees, one is under 20 years old, 11 are between 20 and 30 years old, six are between 31 and 40 years old, and two are over 40 years old. As for the profession, the interviewees cover multiple social groups such as college students, teachers, civil servants, journalists, personal media creators, advertising, public relations, e-commerce trade, full-time homemakers, freelancers, and other social groups.

There are 11 questions in the interview outline. Of these questions, 1 to 4 aim to discuss the interviewers' media contact habits, including their attitudes towards the TikTok platform, information preferences, interaction intentions, and social networks normalized on social media. Besides, questions 5 to 8 in the outline mainly revolve around the analysis of the scene of the collective gaze, including the interviewees', or the gazers' understanding of social irregularities like

the scandal mentioned above and willingness to express their opinions, their persistence in their stance, and their recognition towards other gazers like the short video accounts that disclose these non-standard social behaviors online. The rest of the questions mainly revolve around the interviewees' attitudes towards the impacts of the collective gaze, and their views can reflect those on disclosing short video content, the influences on the development of the situation and the characters involved, and even the real social life.

3.2. Presentation and Description of Experimental Results

3.2.1. Synchronicity Between Gazees and Gazers

During the development of the disclosed scandal that a married state-owned enterprise leader held hands with a young woman in public, combining with the data from TikTok, this paper finds that the attention to the issues almost varied with the development of the situation. The point specifically manifests in the exponential growth of the number of related short video works at every critical time node during the development, and the popularity of these videos will be much higher than that of the videos at non-critical time nodes. For example, on June 7, 2023, the original short video that first disclosed the scandal sparked traction on TikTok, with multiple related terms appearing on the trending list. Besides, more than 200 original short videos were released the next day, which remains the highest value during the development. While during the investigation period from June 8 to July 3, the average daily release of original short videos was less than 20. During the period from July 3 to July 4, with the release of the investigation results about the scandal of the individuals involved, the short video release volume on TikTok shows a significant growth trend and even reached another peak of 131 on June 7 (Figure 1).

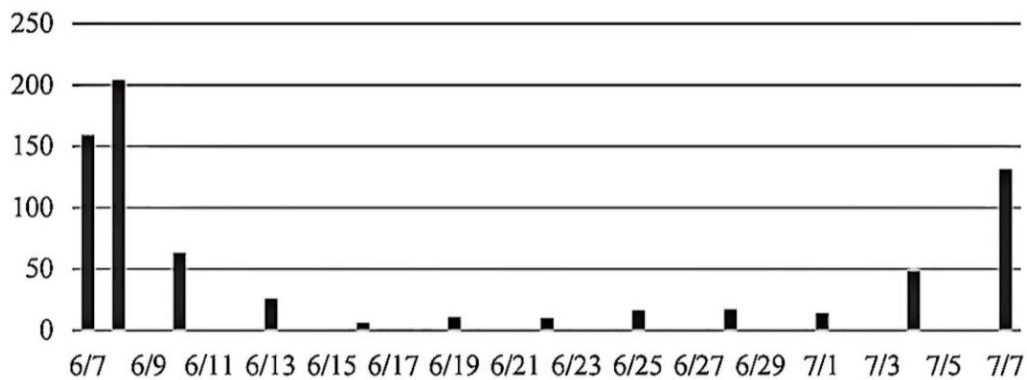


Figure 1: The volume of related short videos during the developments.

These findings largely confirm Assumption 4, which states synchronicity between the gazees and the gazers, indicating that changes in the former can cause changes in the latter. In addition, the number of short videos released caused by the final disclosure of the issue's investigation results is still significantly lower than the number of short videos released at the beginning of the development. This means there may be a loss of gazers during the process of the collective gaze.

3.2.2. Transferability of Gazing Behaviors

To conduct more profound research on gazing behaviors, this paper conducts participatory observation on the selected field, focusing on the video with the highest traction and collecting nearly 9700 comments below the video for text analysis and word frequency analysis. After

comparing with the analysis results of the advertising copy of the 707 short video works, the comparison results indicate that except for the keywords about the topic, such as “holding hands” and “leader,” which are consistently reflected in the word frequency analysis of the two, several keywords such as “skirt,” “photographer,” and “oil price” that initially appear less frequently in short video advertising copy are amplified in the comment area under the videos. For example, “photographer,” which ranks 8th in word frequency of short video advertising copy, becomes the most frequent keyword in the comment area, and even “dress,” which does not appear in the former, has dramatically increased the ranking in the latter (Table 1).

The comparison results confirm transferability in gazing behaviors, as Assumption 3 said. Because of the open and accessible network environment, the speed and scope of the gazing behaviors have expanded infinitely, so the gazers’ sight will shift or even deviate from the center of the gazes being gazed at.

Table 1: The word frequency analysis of advertising copy and comments.

Word Frequency Analysis		
Rank	Advertising Copy	Comments
1	Holding Hands	Photographer
2	Leader	Holding Hands
3	State-own Enterprise	Leader
4	Female	Dress
5	Affair	Oil Price
6	Removal	Chengdu
7	Elite	Petroleum
8	Photographer	Video
9	Petroleum	Beauty
10	Taikoo Li	Luxury Goods

3.2.3.Sociality and Popularity of Gazes

After completing the participatory observation, this paper conducts in-depth interviews with 20 selected interviewees who usually stay active on TikTok. As the representatives of the gazers conducting gazing behaviors, the 20 interviewees showed different information preferences, interests, and hobbies covering various fields such as entertainment, beauty makeup, and food cooking. However, each interviewee stated that he or she would carefully read short videos related to social issues, especially non-standard social behaviors, or related phenomena. Among the 20 interviewees, 90% said they would like to share short videos with others. However, sometimes cross-platform transmission is required, and 80% said they have tried to build regular social networks on the TikTok platform, including their family, colleagues, friends, and classmates. To some extent, it confirms the feasibility and necessity of the research, as well as the familiar collective gaze on social issues. At the same time, this also confirms Assumption 1, which holds that the gazes being gazed at usually have sociality and popularity, and social issues with distinct positions of right and wrong, good, and evil, can easily attract several gazers who conduct gazing behaviors in a short period.

3.2.4.Stances and Attitudes of Gazers

The interviewees’ perceptions and attitudes towards social irregularities are significant for this research. After analyzing the textual information obtained during the in-depth interviews, this paper finds that several keywords, including “stance,” “aversion,” “criticism,” “vulnerable groups,” and

“morality,” appear most frequently, and 60% of interviewees indicated emotional solid attitudes towards the social non-standard behaviors, which essentially confirms Assumption 2 that the gazers who watch and judge specific social individuals and their behaviors usually have their predetermined attitude tendency, and most of their gazing behaviors are conducted from the perspective of justice that is likely subjective. At the same time, when asked questions about the willingness to interact with others on TikTok, 90% of the interviewees stated that they usually click on the comment area to find comments that are close or like their positions and views after reading the short videos. It is worth noting that, among the 20 interviewees, 40% indicated that they are possibly influenced by the opinions of others, and 60% stated that others seldom influence them, while only 20% may doubt their original stances and views. This proves that the gazers’ existing stances and attitudes are usually difficult to change, and sometimes, they even get strengthened when recognizing their peers in the group of gazers during the collective gaze, as Assumption 2 said. At the same time, this also indicates that gazing behaviors not only exist between the gazers and the gazes. But also, in the gazers themselves.

3.2.5. Explicit Gazers and Implicit Gazers

Regarding the dominance of the gazing behaviors, which mainly manifests in the gazers’ willingness to express their opinions towards the disclosed content, each interviewee indicated that he or she would like to click on “like” to show approval of the short video works, and 80% indicated that they might repost the short videos. In comparison, only 20% indicated they may leave comments in the comment area. This means that the gazing behaviors can be broadly divided into explicit gazing and implicit gazing, or, say, the gazers can be divided into explicit and implicit gazers. Implicit gazers express their stances and views with euphemisms or conceal their real views through interactive methods such as reading, sharing, and forwarding. On the contrary, explicit gazers usually express their positions and views directly and clearly through comments or even secondary creations about the short videos. The frequency of implicit gazing behaviors is much higher than explicit gazing behavior, meaning that the number of explicit gazers is much less than that of implicit gazers for specific reasons.

3.2.6. Impacts of Collective Gaze

Finally, this paper conducts further research on the interviewees’ understanding of the impacts of the public gaze, which can be implied by their understanding of influences brought by the disclosing short videos to the development of the disclosed social irregularities and the involved individuals. Among the 20 interviewees, 40% held that disclosing short videos and the attention caused can supervise and even reduce non-standard social behaviors and phenomena, which is consistent with the previous Panopticon theory. In contrast, 60% said too much attention and discussion may negatively impact the involved individuals. Especially when directly asked about their understanding of the relationship between the disclosing video content and the involved individuals, the results indicate that vocabularies such as “excessive attention,” “trial,” and “cyberbullying” are most frequent in the word frequency analysis on the textual information obtained during the interviews. That means that the gazers also hold a negative attitude toward the impacts of their gazing behaviors. Therefore, mainstream media organizations should try to guide positive public opinion to form the correct development of discussion about social focus, and social media platforms like TikTok should improve the regulation of the online discourse to prevent the polarization of public opinion.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this paper expands the research scope of the “gazers” based on the previous Panopticon theory, attempting to view the gazers as groups with unique cultures and behavioral characteristics. Resorting to the research method of Virtual Ethnography to explore the increasingly common phenomenon of the collective gaze on social media, this paper interprets the dynamic relationship between the gazers and the gazes. It constructs an interpretative model to define the mechanism of gazing behaviors by combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. It is worth pointing out that Assumptions 1-4 proposed before the measures are all supported to different degrees during the participatory observation and in-depth interviews. In addition, this paper proposes several new perspectives to enrich the definition of the collective gaze, including the existence of the gazing behaviors among the gazers themselves and the complex impacts of the collective gaze. These viewpoints about the collective gaze may play a constructive role in maintaining the stability of the social system. They can provide helpful directions to control and regulate the network flow on social media platforms and greatly support mainstream media organizations to guide helpful public opinion. The existence of the collective gaze has formed a new media landscape accompanied by the operation of modern social information systems. Thus, its exploration is significant for academia and the media industry.

In future research, efforts can be made to further explore the different scenes of the collective gaze by focusing on negative and positive social issues. This can further refine the research perspectives and broaden the room for discussion. In addition, the collective gaze can be combined with cyber search and opinion polarization, analyzing the aggregation and division of public opinion during the collective gaze. Then, more feasible suggestions can be provided to the related regulatory departments and online platforms, which can prevent the negative impacts exerted by the gazers and their inappropriate gazing behaviors. In addition, the demographic and psychological characteristics of social media users should be further analyzed so that the selected interviewees for in-depth interviews based on comprehensive profiles can be more representative, thus obtaining stronger arguments to support the viewpoints.

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