To Investigate Unofficial Public Accounts on Weibo as the Third Space for University Students

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Abstract: This research particularly sheds light on the online space of social media and focuses on the unofficial public accounts of Guangdong Peizheng College initiated and run by students. By looking at the account performance like the students' engagement, media posts, and social networks, this research examines the commonalities and differences between these accounts. It aims at interpreting the online performance by thematic analysis, to understand the how students construct the third space by self-owned public accounts and engagement and expressions on social media, implying the prominent themes from the everyday online experience of college students. It can examine the virtual engagement of students in the form of third places and spaces in addition to the students physical campus life, and common and university-led virtual community. 60 posts of three related student-run accounts would be chosen to be the targets in thematic analysis. The outcomes of the research are expected to be beneficial to understanding college students, educational to the universities and social media research.

Keywords: Unofficial public accounts, social media, third place, third space

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have become prevalent on university campuses, in terms of the digital tools and equipment in class, online classrooms, learning platforms, and social media permeating their personal, campus, and home lives. The pandemic has made teaching and learning in the world develop on a normalized digital trend, with numerous media technologies and interfaces utilized in the level of school curriculum, teaching design, teaching practice, learning activities, volunteering activities, and so on. Unlike school official media outlets or digital tools as learning spaces, students at Guangdong Peizheng College have created a few self-owned and self-managed public accounts spontaneously to share their lives, discuss social issues, have second-hand resources, and make inquiries. Although there are school official websites, campus public accounts, group chats, and a wider social media community, the students-generated public accounts show differences, have diversified expressions, and can leave more room for the students. Unlike schoolwork platforms like Xuexitong and other official or personal media accounts, students can mix their social life and personal lives in the online community. It's noticeable that students demonstrate more personal, free, and various words and gestures online, which is quite different from other official university accounts where only mainstream and collective interactions appear the most. This research particularly compares multiple categories of online spaces. Due to the lack of focus on Chinese social media or a particular type of

media function, this research will aim to look at the students' engagement on public accounts and the construction of their third place on social media. This research examines the unofficial public accounts generated and managed by students voluntarily on Weibo and aims to discover the commonalities and differences between these accounts. The paper mainly draws upon the theory of the third place from Oldenburg [1], and the relevant scholarship in discussing virtual community and third places, to understand relations among social media community and students' virtual engagement by thematic analysis. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the performance of unofficial public accounts?

2. What are the differences between unofficial public accounts other official accounts, and other online spaces?

3. How the unofficial public accounts can become the third online space for students?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Weibo accounts in Peizheng College

Weibo has always been very popular and influential among Chinese youth, which is one of the top social networking platforms in China with around 605 million monthly active users [2]. Weibo is a lively social platform that can be compared to X (formerly known as Twitter), for sharing, disseminating, and accessing information based on user relationships. Weibo accounts are divided into various types, and personal Weibo is the largest part of Sina Weibo, which is composed of celebrities, experts in different fields, corporate founders, executives, grassroots, etc. Enterprise Weibo, government Weibo, and campus Weibo are other prevalent officially certified account categories. Many universities have set up official Weibo accounts to spread information, enhance communication, and play the role of amplifiers for the relevant departments and errands. They have also gained benefits in education and crisis public relations, becoming a communication link and bridge between schools and students.

Peizheng College's social media public accounts encompass many categories, such as the public accounts of the university, secondary colleges, campus clubs, various school organizations and departments, etc. There are normally social media groups ranging from WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin public accounts with the official name of 'Guangdong Peizheng College'. Most of the official accounts are strictly supervised by executive teachers, even though they are run by students daily. For example, the WeChat public account of Guangdong Peizheng Foreign School has a more than three-tier review process before each script is published on the account page, including the students' writing, editing, review by other students, and finally review by the executive teacher team. However, there are still several public accounts with many followers opened by students on their initiative, some certified by the platform's campus verification while some remain in the personal account category. @Peizheng Forest, @Peizheng Sky, and @Peizheng Fengyun are the main public accounts studied in this paper generated by students voluntarily. Despite the campus certification or not, there is much difference in posting between the unofficial accounts operated by individual students and the schools' official public accounts. They are self-created and self-managed public accounts that are opened by students spontaneously, some of which contain advertisements and some do not, and are operated voluntarily. They are widely disseminated, even gaining a larger number of students' attention compared to the official ones. The contents of the public numbers are set to be anonymous for the students who contribute, thus ensuring their privacy and allowing them to speak more freely.

2.2. Social Media and Third places

According to Oldenburg and Brisett [1], the third places are characterized by existing outside the home and workplace of modern economic production, where people gather primarily to enjoy each

other's company. The distinctive feature is that it could be a designation for many public spaces that host regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated individual gatherings [3]. Oldenburg [3] summarized some specific characteristics of third places, which are being on neutral ground, a social leveler, conversation being the main activity, being accessible, as a home away from home, having 'regulars', and a playful mood. In addition, Oldenburg [3] argued third place does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion, and it is more than a place where people have spontaneous talk emphasizing general issues, current events, and the broad concerns of all members of the community. We can see that Oldenburg emphasized the single culture shared by the community rather than a diversified or cross-cultural space. He further referred to them as 'great good places' because they are the sites for unique communication experiences and sociological benefits. It should be noted that the third place exists when venues and participants exhibit certain characteristics. This means there are a group of regulars that set the tone, and they are constructed through specific social and environmental characteristics [1].

When it comes to virtual communities like social media, Rheingold [4] put forward that while online communities might not be the same as mentioned by Oldenburg, there are many similarities between them. He also believed that the internet world could be an informal public place for people to rebuild a community which was lost "when the malt shop became a mall." Some believe chat rooms and multi-user environments can function as 'third places' [5]. Facebook groups are like a third space of 'school life' where students blend their personal, and social life with academic schoolwork [6]. It's also believed that Facebook community has its relation to the identification with the university community and the university brand [7]. Charles Soukup [8] offers the necessary conditions for creating viable 'virtual' third places and proposes that virtual third places should fit into the participants' 'mundane' and 'ordinary' lived experiences. Kendall [5] discovered online space has similar social settings to that of third places like sociability and interconnection. Douglas Schuler [9] found that online space emphasizes playful conversation via informal talk conversation. Playfulness in the virtual community can be sourced back to the statement of Oldenburg [3] that conversation's improved quality in the third place is also suggested by its temper, being more spirited, less inhibited, and more eagerly pursued. People can conceal and pretend to be anyone online simply, which might make them feel less inhibited and bring about more active conversations. Wright [10] has furthered the discussion into the level of re-concept of third place. He proposed that as there could be obstacles for both places and spaces (virtual communities), we should take a more equalized perspective to look at issues online and offline. Digital media also echoes traditional third places as being social levelers and highly accessible. Many online spaces share the characteristics of being non-discrimination, and no formal criteria for membership into the online community, and can be easily accessed. However, it's also important to mention the differences between social media and original references to Oldenburg's third place. For example, Oldenburg supports the physical local environment, which social media can't fulfill as there could be accounts and communication worldwide. Moreover, the topics in the online community are mostly similar due to the similar purposes and hobbies of the members, which is different from Oldenburg's description of diverse members of a community discussing general topics.

3.   Methodology

As is advocated by Charles Soucup [8], virtual third places should be designed to fit into the participants' 'mundane' and 'ordinary' lived experiences. By looking into the public accounts on Weibo, this research particularly chooses the students-generated and self-managed public accounts as the target to study, which are @Peizheng Forest, @Peizheng Sky, and @Peizheng Fengyun. 20 posts of each account will be drawn and processed in thematic analysis, whereby coding was specifically related to the posts on the three public accounts on social media. The criteria for choosing

the 60 posts include but are not limited to the abundance of information, diversified purposes, the popularity of the posts by the number of reviews, comments, and other interactions, etc. Since there is no private subscription or other limitations to accessing the accounts, any users who registered on Weibo can have access to the public account. The data in this study are the anonymous posts of the accounts, without consideration of the comments of each post, to avoid the privacy intruding of an individual user. Due to the language of the posts being Chinese, the posts will first be translated into English, and then be processed in coding and categorizing. Acknowledging the diverse forms of thematic analysis, this research will follow a six-phase guide by Braun and Clarke [11] from familiarizing with data which is to understand and translate the posts of three accounts including some pictures. Secondly, it comes to generating initial codes, which means highlighting important, interesting, and repetitive expressions, and replacing them with shorter phrases or words. Thirdly, it comes to searching for themes, which in this case, might add a step to generating sub-themes. This means identifying similar and important patterns across and within the thirty posts of three accounts. Then, reviewing themes is to reflect if themes are suitable for the data, including if any missing or other problems. Lastly, it comes to defining and naming the themes, which involves formulating the exact meaning and understandable name of each theme. There are also other perspectives developed based on the thematic analysis technique which was put forward by Ryan and Bernand [12]. There are repetition, similarities, differences, cutting, and splitting, which can be beneficial for the diversified similar accounts. Repetition refers to the recurrent topics, similarities, and differences that focus on codes of concordance or discord, while cutting and splitting emphasize grouping codes to evade the repetitive themes and define major themes [11].

4. Data Analysis

Table 1: Thematic analysis of @Peizheng Sky

Searching for themes from codes	Reviewing themes	Define and rename themes
university life, uncertainty about the future, working hard, regrets about university, negative feelings about life and university, positive feelings about life and university, looking forward to the future, schoolwork worries, advertising, personal and obscure feelings	university life, uncertainty about the future, hopes and good wishes for the future, negative feelings, positive feelings, advertising, personal and implicit feelings	university life, uncertainty about the future, positive value, negative/positive feelings, advertising, personal and implicit feelings

Table 2: Thematic analysis of @Peizheng Forest

Searching for themes from codes	Reviewing themes	Define and rename themes
queries about graduation and dissertation, university life, advertising about part-time opportunities, advertising about task substitution, second-hand market, worries about the future and jobs, dreams, personal and implicit feelings and sentiments, comment on other topics	queries about graduation and dissertation, university life, worries about jobs and future, second-hand market, advertising, personal and implicit feelings, daily life topics	school-related queries, university life, worries about jobs and future, advertising personal and implicit feelings, daily life topics

Table 3: Thematic analysis of @Peizheng Fengyun

| Searching for themes from codes	Reviewing themes	Define and rename themes
reposts of other school official accounts, reposts of other generally famous accounts, community support encouraging civic engagement, school activities, positive value, daily life	reposts of school officials and other accounts, university life sharing, community support, school activities, positive value, encouraging civic engagement, daily life	connection with school officials and other accounts, university activity, positive value, daily life topics, university life sharing
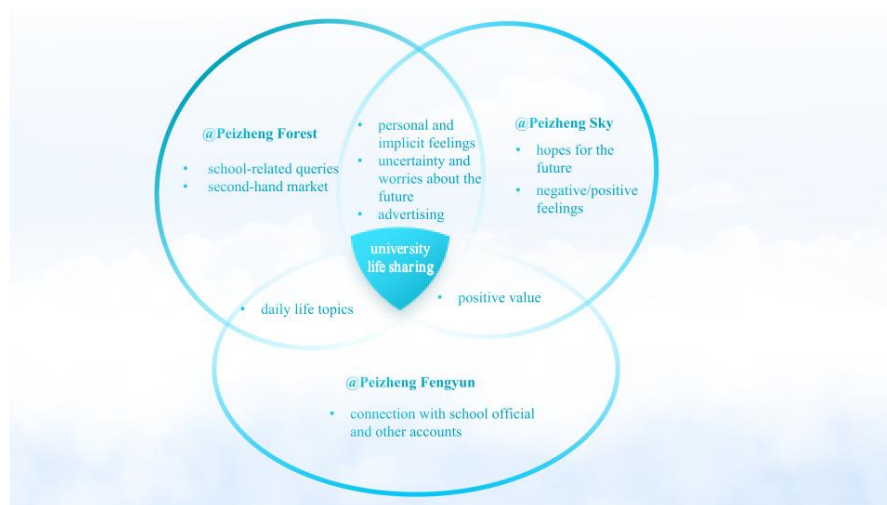
Figure 1: Thematic analysis of three accounts

5. Discussions

5.1. The Different Performance

As analyzed in the figures, we can draw a conclusion about the frequent and prominent themes. Both positive and negative attitudes and ideas are commonly posted on @Peizheng Sky and @Peizheng Forest, which can represent students' perplexed feelings towards university life and the future. The general stance of @Peizheng Sky seems to be more personal due to more posts related to individual sentiments, while @Peizheng Forest is more like a combination of practical purpose for advertising and second-hand market and the place where students disclose their worries. @Peizheng Fengyun stands as the different one due to the dependence on reposting and connecting with school official accounts, while there are several daily life topics and positive value topics. Moreover, the prominent pattern we could draw from Figure 1 is that the topic overlap is about university life sharing, which implies university life is the shared culture for the online community established by the accounts. On the other hand, there could be multi-cultural conversations taking place on Weibo, as a diversified or cross-cultural space. For example, there are posts about other social news that is not related to the university, opinion sharing of social issues, and so on. It shows a cultural space gathering several people with similar backgrounds, while the extension to other aspects of the society is not limited. It's also notable that these students-initiated accounts like @Peizheng Fengyun looking to connect with official accounts, despite that the account states that there is a difference between them. Unlike @Peizheng Sky or @Peizheng Forest, posts of @Peizheng Fengyun are mostly decided by the operator him/herself, with numerous reposts to establish relations within and out of the campus

network, despite being lateral sometimes. This can be explained by the conflicted status between a completely student-managed and root-based platform, to stand for the individuals, or become the megaphone of the university in the name of "voicing the truth for students".

5.2. The Traditional Third Place

The unofficial accounts act like traditional third places for students. Firstly, the online community constituted by the accounts is far away from both the students' homes and schools, which are geographical and most frequently accessed locations. Students have unique social interactions and enjoy each other in the online space. They could talk about university life, have spontaneous talks, share worries and happiness, and express implicit, negative, or positive feelings. This features the functions of sociability, spontaneity, community building, and emotional expressiveness as noted by Oldenburg [1]. Secondly, the unofficial social media accounts echo traditional third places as being social levelers and highly accessible. Many online spaces share the characteristics of being non-discrimination since there are no formal criteria for membership into the online community. There are about 80,000 followers for the three accounts altogether, most of whom are perceived as students, teachers, alumni, or people who are interested in the accounts of Peizheng College. As long as you registered on Weibo, you can subscribe and receive the posts updates, while even if you don't register and act as a "visitor" browsing simply on Weibo, it's also possible to receive the posts of these accounts randomly due to the recommendation settings of Weibo. What's more, for @Peizheng Sky and @Peizheng Forest, there are equal chances for students individuals to send their posts and publicize their ideas and emotions, no matter what kind of topic or theme. It's also common to see students' expressions of negative feelings or opinions in disagreement with the school management. For @Peizheng Fengyun, there are posts of philanthropy to encourage students to raise funds for the ill alumni or attract more students to engage in campus events. In addition, it's worth mentioning that all three accounts have no operations of advertisement of other businesses aiming to make profits. It means that the motivations for initiating the accounts are for public good or personal interest, as stated by @Peizheng Fengyun that " unofficial school account and from an ordinary person, aiming to voice the truth..." in the personal profile page. Thus, there are a few limitations to following the public accounts, for unofficial public accounts, provide equal access to everyone to see, engage, and publicize and voice themselves. Thirdly, conversation also remains the main activity, which can be found in most of the posts and the comments, that can constitute the interactive conversation. For example, the latest post from @Peizheng Fengyun on 9 Dec, 2023 is "On my 30th anniversary, I have retrieved my password. But after logging in, the Peizheng version has been updated for 10 years" which was set on top of the post page receiving 94 comments and 190 likes. Many comments express their attachment and memories with @Peizheng Fengyun, some of which receive more comments. Many other interactions happen not only between the public account and the students or viewers but also between students and other students or Weibo users. Lastly, playfulness is immersed within the social media interactions, which is different among the three accounts. As we can summarize, daily life topics appear in the post history of @Peizheng Fengyun and @Peizheng Forest, while students have more implicit feelings to expose on @Peizheng Sky. It could be a comment based on news from @China Daily or reposts on other school official accounts. The range of topics is wide with a focus on university life, and the tone or mood for expressions is diversified but mostly playful and not so serious compared to other official public accounts of Peizheng College. Therefore, the unofficial public accounts of Peizheng College are arenas beyond home and work with easy access and non-discrimination towards viewers and participants, featuring sociability, community building, emotional expressiveness, playfulness, and interactive conversations. There is a wide range of topics, while the focus is related to university life, which is both a tap into multicultural communication and the specialized field of campus culture.

5.3. The Virtual Third Space

According to Soucup [8], there are three necessary conditions for the virtual space to become the third place, which are localization, accessibility, and presence. Localization means the community should be localized or situated within an identifiable cultural vibe. He further developed upon the concept to move from a 'place' to 'space', and emphasized the symbolical construction of local places by participants' interactions. In this case, the unofficial public accounts on Weibo possess localization due to the creation of them are firstly geographically in Peizheng, Guangzhou. Also, their daily posts are mostly affairs happening in Peizheng College such as posts from @Peizheng Fengyun, or posts of advertisement, and school-related queries from @Peizheng Sky and @Peizheng Forest. Even though it's a public sphere that every Weibo user can access, deep interaction and participation in the conversation requires a shared cultural background, such as previous knowledge about Peizheng College, the school regulations, the popular topics among university students, and the surrounding environment. These constitute a similar cultural vibe and shared community. The reason to name the virtual community as a space instead of just a place is that there could be multi-dimensional, multi-cultural, and more interconnected topics, individuals, groups, and other online accounts and offline locations. These elements constitute an integrated and active space where people are engaged. Access is the second necessary condition of a viable virtual third place. Access to the unofficial accounts is not limited, because of the widespread internet technology, the public awareness and popularity of Weibo, and no private setting of the accounts. Presence as the third condition refers to creating a warm and welcoming home away from home and workplace. It is in a positive environment that people can generate more spontaneous, engaging, and great conversations. As discovered in Figure 1, we could find the overlapped theme "positive value" for @Peizheng Fengyun and @Peizheng Sky, "hopes for the future" of @Peizheng Sky. Thus, it's common to see students enjoying and trying to keep an optimistic attitude in recording and sharing their thoughts on public accounts. In addition to positive mood, it's also prevalent to notice the negative expressions like worries about the future or graduation, implicit feelings sharing like being ashamed of falling in love with a teacher, etc. No matter what kind of tone or mood, students are actively engaged in the virtual community, and are willing to disclose their sentiments which are reluctant to be shared in other places or spaces. Hence, their presence is demonstrated by their spontaneous and engaging posts. Therefore, considering social media and technology as third place, the unofficial public accounts constitute a virtual third space, where participants can take part in the identifiable cultural community, with non-discrimination but conditional accessibility, presenting in a spontaneous and engaging way.

6. Conclusion

Focusing on three unofficial public accounts of Peizheng College on Weibo, this research particularly looks into the daily experience and expressions of these accounts and investigates the virtual community as the third space based on the theory of the traditional concept of the third place. There are comparisons between official and unofficial public accounts and between the physical and virtual communities. By thematic analysis, this research explores the prominent themes, such as sharing university life, positive/negative feelings, positive value, worries or hopes for the future, advertising, second-hand market, daily life topics, connection with other accounts, etc. University life sharing stands as the most frequently mentioned type of theme, while other general themes are disseminated. From the perspective of traditional third place, the unofficial public accounts of Peizheng College are arenas beyond home and work with easy access and non-discrimination towards viewers and participants, featuring sociability, community building, emotional expressiveness, playfulness, and interactive conversations. The unofficial public accounts constitute a great space where participants can take part in the identifiable cultural community, with non-discrimination but conditional

accessibility, presenting in a spontaneous and engaging way. Furthermore, the interconnection with other official or general accounts explains an extending impact upon the social network, which can further reveal the constructive live experience of these accounts in the third space.

The extended performance related to the virtual community of the unofficial accounts has a certain influence on other social networks. Despite @Peizheng Fengyun and @Peizheng Sky have stopped updating, there are still recent comments in their posts, and they are often referred to by students by their nicknames like "Brother Fengyun" and "Sky" appearing in other social media or even daily conversations. Therefore, the influence of the online community is long-lasting extending beyond just their online platforms, which can be regarded as a reconstruction of account-related culture, in the midst of campus online culture. Therefore, this paper particularly has educational implications for universities, education administrations, and teachers in terms of understanding students from their daily communication practices on social media, and further enhancing the mutual relationship.

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