Study of Generation Z's Self-Gazing Phenomenon in the Merit Society: The Case of RED Users

Zhi Lin[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester, Manchester, M139PL, United Kingdom*
a. zhi.lin-3@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
*corresponding author

Abstract: The Merit Society provides a potentially plausible explanation of modern society, indicating that in the excessive pursuit of wealth and performance, collective values and labour relations have been profoundly transformed and thus the ways of operating in traditional regimented societies are less relevant. In the emerging Merit Society, where wealth is an absolute pursuit, there has been an alienation of shared values, labour relations and individual choices. To investigate the concept of self in a merit-based society and to rationalise from a communication perspective, this thesis concentrates on the phenomenon of self-gazing and attempts to examine the process and causes of self-gazing in the Merit Society, through reviewing communication theories and analysing key case studies of RED and its Generation Z users. It is ultimately found that modern internet platforms such as RED have condoned the alienation of values and self at both collective and individual levels, which could stem from the profound impact of the Merit Society and the neoliberal wave.

Keywords: the merit society, self, self-gaze, generation Z, RED

1. Introduction

The Merit Society provides a potentially plausible explanation of modern society, indicating that in the excessive pursuit of wealth and performance, collective values and labour relations have been profoundly transformed and thus the ways of operating in traditional regimented societies are less relevant. Nevertheless, the core arguments in this philosophical framework have not yet been examined and discussed to the same extent as more scholarly works, signifying the possibility for further analysis and exploration of new social structures and internal changes.

To delve into the connotations of the concept of self in the new social context, this thesis proceeds based on the theoretical framework of the Merit Society, sorting out its main elements in a literature review and summarising the three necessary process conditions that constitute the phenomenon of self-gaze, comprising self-presentation, narcissistic complexes and self-objectification. The thesis subsequently takes the example of Generation Z users in the RED platform and concretely analyses how its users undergo the process of alienation of shared values and self-alienation, and dissects the underlying logic of the occurrence of the phenomenon of self-glaring in the capital perspective. Lastly, the thesis also delivers an explanation of the inevitability of the phenomenon within a neoliberal framework.

The thesis attempts to propose a plausible interpretation of the concept of the self, particularly the phenomenon of self-glaring, in the framework of the new era, offering considerable theoretical innovation; the combination of the philosophical background and the analysis of the communication phenomenon could also be of reference value to future researchers.

2. The Merit Society

2.1. Characteristics

The theoretical framework of the Merit Society may have become a means by which the modern world could be conceptualised and understood, in which wealth and performance were bundled together as fiercely pursued goals. Nevertheless, within the long-term process of reinventing a new material orientation, the traditional forms of harsh social discipline systems and measures of reward and punishment have ceased to have a durable effect; conversely, self-control models promote the individual's value and the meaning of striving has prevailed. In concrete terms, the affirmative rhetoric of individual choice and the possibility of endeavouring to achieve one's maximum potential, with the same spurring effect, has been applied more extensively in Merit societies than in the negative injunctions previously used, which in turn implied that a certain degree of freedom was granted to individuals [1]. Regrettably, this transformative empowerment, apparently more humanitarian in nature, remains focused on exploitation, hence the so-called right to autonomy fails to be linked in reality to the realisation of true self-worth and instead throws individuals into an indefensible false freedom.

2.2. Alienation

Alienation has been prevalent in the framework of the Merit Society that may be in vogue. To begin with, in the pursuit of greater levels of profit, labourers are being required to contribute more to production while remaining relegated to a mere animal of labour, under the oppression that is growing rather than diminishing given the tight bond between themselves and their labour output [2]. Further, value alienation at the social level may be an indispensable step in the overall process of labour alienation, considering that the promotion of a new value system based on de-individuation in line with merit orientation - advocating, for instance, the significance of individual success - contributes to the completion of the complete construction of closure of the loop between individual values, organisational performance and overall profitability. Whereas for individuals wrapped up in grand value narratives, self-talk and sense-seeking can more readily become blurred in the false freedom granted to them, and the concept of the self is constantly dissolved in the impact of the streaming age and the alteration of the collective unconscious, which might prove to be more severe than the alienation of dominant values.

3. Self-gaze

3.1. Self-presentation and the Social Self

As discussed above, the diverse dimensions of alienation in merit societies exert considerable strain on individuals, and self-gaze represents one possible consequence of such pressure, whose overriding criterion relates to the need for self-presentation. In particular, in the post-information society where social networks have flourished, it has gained additional significance to both manage and promote a particular impression of oneself in external perspectives and the resultant act of demonstrating self-information and responding to the results of others' displays, namely self-presentation, is noted as a prominent manifestation in contemporary society [3].

In terms of self-constitution, the need for self-presentation in the post-information society maintains conformity to the context of the mirror self, or social self. Specifically, the social self has more concern for the mirrored evidence of feedback from others to the individual than for its self [4]; these feedbacks serve as a source for individuals to collect, aggregate and clarify their self-perceptions. In turn, since self-perceptions in this condition arise almost exclusively from interactions with others, the social self receives a more profound degree of impact from the external environment.

3.2. Narcissism and the Alienated Self

Socialised self-representation may not constitute the only way to generate self-gazing behaviour, as narcissistic complexes, for example, could also facilitate the spontaneous formation of self-focus. As with the mythical Naxos who gazed at his reflection in the water, the narcissist derives an instinctive pleasure from the repeated appreciation of the mirrored image of the self; the phenomenon of the selfie represents a typical example in a post-information age. Particularly, within the selfie process, where technology assists in the rapid emergence of the idealised self, thus delivering the pleasure and satisfaction that the selfie-taker needs.

Unfortunately, most narcissistic behaviours in modern society do not occur in isolation; rather, they are subject to new alienation in the context of contradictory self-images. In the case of selfies, as an example, the ideal self-image on the screen turns out not to be the actual self, and the discrepancy and fragmentation between them have the potential to collapse the subject of the figure [5]; moreover, as posting, disseminating and obtaining social appraisal reservations form an essential part of the act of selfies, narcissists failing an exit from the social gaze would continue having to participate in the ranks of the self-gaze and accept self-alienation.

3.3. The Objectified Self in the Context of Merit Orientation

Merit societies have been constructed with supremely sound logic and covert orientations. In conjunction with the digital age of information, they have been repeatedly exaggerating the value of the social self, thereby constantly absorbing individuals into their valuation systems and propagating them on a collective level. The objectification of the self, especially the sexual objectification of women, emerges as a typical sacrifice under these grand narratives.

At the outset, it needs to be recognised that the merit society, which rationalises the goal of profit sought by capital, also reveals an implicit tendency towards the de-individuation and commodification of workers and their productive capacities in its judgements. The female group, which is chronically socially disadvantaged, can thus not afford to escape the possibility of being objectified in a meritocracy. Most notably, the strict social commentary system under the male gaze results in more behaviour towards body shame or self-control among women and a greater probability of depression thereafter. Remarkably, suffering from high levels of self-objectification and subsequent potentially high levels of depression has also been identified in adolescent groups [6].

4. The Phenomenon of Self-glaring in RED

4.1. Generation Z and RED

Dimock, the president of a nonpartisan American think tank named Pew Research Center, proposed an updated definition that Generation Z can be delineated more explicitly as a generation born between 1996 and 2012 who were born into vast mobility and multiple realities, profoundly shaped by a developed Internet society, and who consequently display a unique drive for truth and deep comprehension of reality [7-8]; they also exhibit a distinct personality distinct from their previous

generations, They show a distinct individuality that is different from that of individuals in any previous generation, for whom the self represents paramount value.

RED, a Chinese social and e-commerce platform, has targeted Generation Z, an upcoming major force in social development, by developing extensive surveys, tools and promotions geared toward their needs. On this virtual platform, which already had over 100 million monthly active users in October 2019, a substantial number of Generation Z users are labelling their lives, as the slogan of the software implies [9]. Users are publicising their opinions in the form of posting personal notes and interacting with information during the classic process of liking, commenting or re-posting; simultaneously, it enables them to purchase items on display, yet this function could be less popular than, for instance, information search and note posting.

4.2. Shared Value

RED operates successfully, with a massive volume of submissions and sophisticated algorithms that allow access to its vast database for commercial purposes. Nevertheless, RED, known as the "little colonial handbook" or "little donkey book", has exposed other issues, including a biased collective value orientation.

The RED platform encourages "authenticity, upward mobility and diversity" with a willingness to meet a broad range of individuals to present themselves. It is, however, a matter of concern that the platform may be condoning the formation of a deeper collective unconscious based on the fulfilment of users' self-fulfilment demands and that these collective orientations are, to some extent, too stringent and anxiety-inducing. Examples could be the promotion of an idealised body image on the platform, which is described as a perverse judgement of users, especially female users, under the aesthetic orientation of 'light, young and slim'. Also, irrational competition in terms of personal qualifications spreads across the community and undergoes more subjective and offensive comparisons and dissemination among users (for instance, it would be considered shameful not to score at least 7 in the IELTS exam). Additionally, the intense pursuit of success stories and social status has been a common occurrence in RED.

4.3. Self-regulation

RED captures the self-representational needs and narcissistic complexes of the Generation Z group, creating a virtual ecology sufficient to accommodate the idealised self. Yet, it also contributes to the formation of shared values in a collective self-gaze, which further deepens the alienation of the individual self.

Users unlock the mirroring door to their social selves when entering the electronic screen for editing a note. In the invisible gaze, one hopes that the final presentation of the self conforms to popular values and accordingly dedicates time to contemplate whether their impressions will attract attention, satisfy the external world's preconceived definitions of beauty or achievement, and attract adequate praise or criticism. However, the self that emerges from the gaze remains incapable of fulfilling the needs of individual presentation, hence their preference for what the outside observer desires; rather than the excellent images of others in large traffic accounts, users may also maintain a certain frequency of discussion amongst themselves to reflect on the disparities and adapt their side.

Here, self-correction and discipline are formed in individuals and communities, in the context of prolonged exposure to electronics, and the popularity of peer-to-peer social circles; or they can be conceived of as the product of a certain concentration of self-glaring and self-alienation.

4.4. Ontology

The programme of RED, responsible for the occurrence of changing values, deserves to be debated more than those who choose to commit to transformation. The showcase of wealth constructed by RED exposes individuals to a certain 'can' - the ability to combine a youthful appearance, a perfect figure, a decent resume and worldly success. These packaged and exaggerated value orientations push users to climb the path of personal capital accumulation in a positive discourse, though in an overall sense, it reflects some degree of capitalist bullying of the ordinary.

Specifically, users in the gaze essentially lose the freedom to reflect or manifest their true selves; conversely, in their false freedom, succumb unconsciously to the preaching of the gaze and eventually complete the gaze and alienation catalyzed by a combination of ideal self and peer pressure. By now, the capitalist has secured flow realisation and commercial success, while whether the individual has endeavoured to accomplish their desired goal, suffered physically or mentally for it, or strayed farther from their genuine self, ceases to matter.

5. The Home of the Self

5.1. Coincidence and Inevitability

The explosion and popularity of RED involved serendipity, as It captured the enormous commercial value of the young group, mainly Generation Z, and the female group; it also perceived the weakness of e-commerce in sales-only mode and the void of social products among the Internet in mainland China, resulting in the creation of a harmonious business ecology where reputation and flow are equally sizable, and where users experience positive emotions resulting from information interaction and virtual social interaction assisted by Internet technology.

Yet, its process of reshaping and alienating individual self-worth exists as a necessity in a merit society. Given the prominence of wealth and profit within a meritocratic orientation, the tendency for capital to operate in a way that reinforces any possible exploitation, including labour and the individual self. Generally, by constructing a system of hidden affirmative discourses, capital-dominant platforms such as RED exert an impact on the valuation systems of their users, subsequently persuading them to transcend themselves amidst mass gazing and alienation. This is, overall, an alteration unavoidable for individuals immersed in the explosive volume of information and communal atmosphere of the digital age.

5.2. The Disappearance of the Other

The prevalence of meritocracy may have its roots in the form in which neoliberalism has evolved so far.

An opportunity to contemplate and engage with the real self was denied to people in meritocratic societies, as Han, the Neozoic German philosopher with great enthusiasm for constantly revealing social pathologies of the modern age, further states, given that the other, which undermines productivity, is not tolerated in highly output-seeking cultures; alternatively, the other, which constitutes a crucial antagonistic part of self-seeking, may have been dissolved by neoliberalism. Thus, in the endless canonic, affirmative contexts available in the mass information, the negation from the other that once confronted the self vehemently no longer exists, replaced by a homogeneity that erases differences in connection, contrast and praise [10]. It is eminently comprehensible that any dissent that might exist disappears into coherence when the seemingly lingering criticism represents a unified social value orientation.

Hence, in its attempt to critique and supersede the repression of the self in the Discipline Society, neoliberalism did not interpret a superior self, but rather bypassed the contradictory relationship

between the other and the self, and established the ultimate meaning as an authority; consequently, de-individuation and alienation were perpetuated under the unquestionable slogan of freedom.

6. Conclusion

This thesis mainly discusses the possible formation process of self-glaring under the Merit Society, analyses how this is presented in the social platform RED, dominated by Generation Z, and attempts to explain its causes in the context of individual psychology, social value orientation and neoliberal culture. Ultimately, the thesis argues that the Internet platform represented by RED has contributed to the occurrence of value alienation and self-alienation, leading individuals to suffer from excessive self-glaring and self-regulation, which exists inevitably within the meritocracy and neoliberal influence.

This thesis remains subjective in its framing and logical derivation, for instance, lacking certain integrity in the analysis of the phenomenon of self-glaring. Further improvements in these two main areas will be achieved in future research, while the definitions of self and freedom will be further expanded.

References

[1]   Han, B. C. (2015). The Burnout Society. Stanford University Press.
[2]   Hayden, P. (2014). Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts. Routledge.
[3]   Schlenker, B. R. (2012). Self-presentation.
[4]   Cooley, C. H. (1998). On self and social organization. University of Chicago Press.
[5]   Li, Y., & Wu, Y. (2019). Self-identity in mirroring and gazing: An analysis of contemporary "selfie" culture. Fujian Forum (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition) (11), 133-138. doi:CNKI:SUN:FJLW.0.2019-11-018.
[6]   Jones, B. A., & Griffiths, K. M. (2015). Self-objectification and depression: An integrative systematic review. Journal of Affective Disorders, 171, 22–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.09.011.
[7]   Dimock, M. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. Pew Research Center, 17(1), 1-7.
[8]   Francis, T., & Hoefel, F. (2018). True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies. McKinsey & Company, 12.
[9]   RED. (2019). About us. Retrieved April 17, 2023, from: https://www.xiaohongshu.com/protocols/about
[10] Han, B. C. (2018). The expulsion of the other: Society, perception and communication today. John Wiley & Sons.