The Presentation of Self in Social Media: Re-analysis of Front and Backstage Concepts

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Abstract: Social media provides individuals with new social interaction scenes, different from the face-to-face interaction scenes that Erving Goffman's dramaturgy focuses on. This study focuses on the concept of front and backstage in dramaturgy and takes social media as the interactive situation to explore the adaptation and changes of these concepts in online interaction. This research had five findings. First, there is no longer a fixed and standard setting in the online interactive scenes of social media. Second, the personal front has inauthenticity. Third, the performance is free from the limitations of the performer's own body and region. Fourth, a new area of interaction has emerged -- the "online pseudo backstage". It is the area between the front and backstage, which refers to the intentional disclosure of part of a performer's backstage on a social media platform. Fifth, in online interactions, Internet technology provides a protective barrier for performers. However, that does not mean backstage is entirely safe in the era of big data. Based on the above findings, Internet technology strongly supports performers' idealized self-presentation and greatly improves performers' impression management ability. However, at the same time, people should use social convenience properly, beware of the excessive pursuit of network personalization, and pay attention to self-improvement. Finally, since this study has analyzed social media from a macro perspective, future studies can focus more on the commonalities and differences in self-presentation by users on different social media platforms.

Keywords: dramaturgy, erving goffman, social media

1. Introduction

The development of Internet technology and the popularization of intelligent terminals have rolled up the tide of increasingly networked, virtualized, and mobile human social interaction. Today, social media has been integrated into people's lives, changing people's social behavior and interaction. As of January 2023, there are 4.76 billion social media users in the world today, equivalent to 59.4 percent of the world's population. Social media has always been the most popular channel for information and public opinion [1]. People are used to accessing, sharing, and exchanging information through social media. The average global user accesses or uses 7.2 different social platforms per month and spends 2 hours and 31 minutes per day on social media [2]. Social media provides an opportunity for people to express their opinions, spread information and enhance social interaction [3].

Goffman's dramaturgy has a prominent contribution and influence on the social theories of microcosmic interpersonal interaction. Goffman, in his 1959 book *Self-Presentation in Everyday Life*, put forward dramaturgy, which uses dramatic metaphors to explain individual interactions in everyday life. In his view, individuals in social interaction are like performers on the stage, and interactions between people are dramatic. Moreover, Goffman divided the performance areas into front and backstage. In the front, individuals will use role-building to establish their ideal image, while backstage, they will retain those behaviors that undermine their ideal role [4]. Therefore, the individual's ability to manage his front and backstage greatly affects his performance.

It is worth emphasizing that dramaturgy is based on the situation of face-to-face interaction. The theory is an analysis of real interactions in tenant farming communities in the British Shetland Islands. That is to say, all interactions between a group of individuals from the beginning to the end are simultaneously and continuously present [5]. In the Internet era, benefiting from the development of information technology, individuals can communicate and interact without time and space restrictions through social media platforms. Online interaction has become a staple of everyday socializing.

Any theory has certain supporting scenarios to make it valid. The adaptation of dramaturgy to online virtual interaction is a problem worth discussing. Based on this, this research focuses on the concept of front and backstage in dramaturgy, analyzes the impression management behavior of social media users, and discusses the change of front and backstage in interpersonal interaction based on social media. This research, firstly, hopes to think about dramaturgy in the new situation from the theoretical level. The second is to encourage social media users to think deeply about their online self-presentation.

2. Concept Definition

2.1. Social Media

Social media is a new social media based on the development of Internet technology. The concept of Social Media first appeared in Antony Mayfield's 2007 book *What is Social Media.* The book regards social media as a new type of online media that gives users a great space to participate and believes that social media has the characteristics of participation, openness, communication, community, and connectivity [6]. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as a series of web applications built on the technology and ideology of web 2.0, which allows the creation and communication of UGC (user-generated content) [7]. Compared with traditional media, social media gives everyone an equal voice. That is the ability to create and disseminate information. Through social media, people mix and match pictures, texts, videos, and other content and conduct social interaction to establish a connection and generate meaning [8].

As Internet technology continues to change and innovate, the concept of social media has yet to be defined internationally. The social media discussed in this research is an online platform that provides users with the functions of information exchange, collection, release, and sharing through text, pictures, video, voice, and other forms of expression through the Internet and other technologies, with mobile phones and computers as the main output terminals. Social media can be divided into two categories. One is the social networks that connect nodes by people, such as WeChat and WhatsApp; The other is the media platform with content as the connection node, such as Twitter and Facebook.

2.2. Front

The *front* is the standard expressive equipment used consciously or unconsciously by the individual during the performance. It is part of the scene that the individual regularly defines for the observer in

a general and fixed way during the performance. Goffman divides the front into two parts: *setting* and *personal front* [5].

The settings include stage facilities, decorations, layouts, and other background items that provide stage sets and props for an individual to perform activities throughout the stage space [5]. Goffman argues that, in general, settings are fixed, so whoever wants to use a particular setting as part of a performance can only start their act if they are in the proper setting; The performance ends when people leave the setting, such as doctors and hospitals, teachers and schools.

The personal front is part of the expressive equipment that allows audiences to identify internally with the performer, and it is taken for granted that the personal front moves with the performer, such as clothing, gender, and facial expression [5].

2.3. Backstage

Backstage is a place where the audience does not enter or is generally not allowed to enter. Performers try to suppress behaviors that might detract from the self-impression they want to create and hide them backstage. In addition, performers are more relaxed backstage and more authentic about themselves. The dishwasher guy in the restaurant kitchen, for example, would spit phlegm into the coal bucket, and the women would cross their legs as they rested. If the above behavior is put in the front, it will be considered inappropriate and conflict with the character impression it creates [5].

To sum up, from the perspective of dramaturgy, the front and backstage are shown in Figure 1. Performers, settings, and personal front are located at the front while the performance is in progress. The fact that performers and audiences are in the same spatiotemporal range means that performers' impression management activities are real-time and have less fault-tolerant space. In addition, spectators are likely to intrude backstage, which is often not well protected.
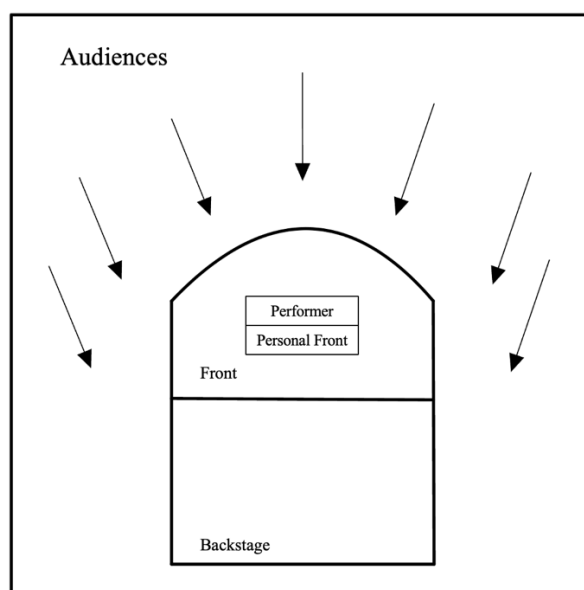

Figure 1: The stage area in dramaturgy.

3. Discussion

3.1. Constructed Settings

In dramaturgy, the setting is part of the front stage. Goffman believes that in most cases, a particular setting is necessary for an individual's performance [5]. For example, for a barber, the barber shop,

barber tools, mirrors, and more are the settings, which he needs to have to gain the trust of customers. The above conclusions apply to offline interactive situations. However, there is no fixed and standard setting in the online interactive scene.

First, offline performance is continuous, while online performance is episodic. In social media, individuals can create an ideal image by selectively presenting parts of their performance. A traveler, for example, can project a positive image of himself as a sociable person by posting a description of how he interacts with a foreign friend, but he may avoid an embarrassing situation during the trip. Secondly, offline performance is real-time, while online performance is time-delayed. In social media, users can manipulate the information they post, for example, by managing the list of people they can see and by setting a time limit for when information should be made public. Moreover, offline performance is face-to-face, while online performance is long-distance. Social media allows people to interact with each other regardless of distance.

Therefore, due to the fragmented, remote, and time-delayed nature of the online presentation, performers can selectively present their performances according to their own needs and construct corresponding settings. An individual can shape his ideal identity by posting carefully prepared words, pictures, videos, and other information on social media. For example, a social media user can establish himself as a travel devotee by frequently posting pictures of scenery in other countries and transcripts of his travels, but he never goes anywhere. The pictures and texts are fake and fabricated.

3.2. Personal Front Distortion

In dramaturgy, the personal front is an important medium for conveying performance information. In face-to-face interaction, the audience can judge the authenticity of the performance by observing the personal front of the performer. For example, in the special situation of the interview, because the nonverbal behavior is often difficult to disguise and easy to reveal the true psychology of the individual, the interviewer will often discriminate and infer based on the nonverbal behavior of the applicant [9]. Also, the performer often has difficulty manipulating or modifying his personal front. For example, gender or skin color is hard to hide.

However, in the online interactive situation, the performer's personal front is no longer directly presented in front of the audience and can be modified by the performer at will. In social media, users can customize the personal information they want to display, including information they choose to conceal or even fabricate. Users can reshape their image online by customizing their gender, identity, living status, age, region, and other information to control their self-presentation on the platform. Given the nature of online interactions, such behavior is often difficult to detect.

3.3. Actual Self and Online Virtual Self

According to Goffman, the self that performs front in everyday life hangs on the performer himself. In other words, the performance is attached to the body of the performer. However, in an online interactive context, the performing self is a virtual individual created by the performer. This virtual individual is not dependent on anybody (see Figure 2). Due to the personalized screen interface, virtual network interaction, cross-time, and other characteristics, individuals can expand the possibility of self-presentation by controlling their virtual individuals on social media [10]. The image of the virtual individual is carefully modified by the performer, but the performer's behavior cannot be observed during the performance. As a result, audiences are left to infer a performer's image based on the limited information he posts on social media. Thus, it is entirely possible for performers to act in ways that violate the identity of their virtual characters. For example, a person could post a beautiful, cultured text to social media while swearing in front of a screen.

Moreover, in dramaturgy, an individual cannot begin his performance until he is in the front. However, in an online interactive scenario, the performer is in backstage behind the screen, while his online "virtual self" is in the front (see Figure 2). In short, individuals can perform backstage. This means that the performance is not only free from physical constraints but also free from regional constraints.
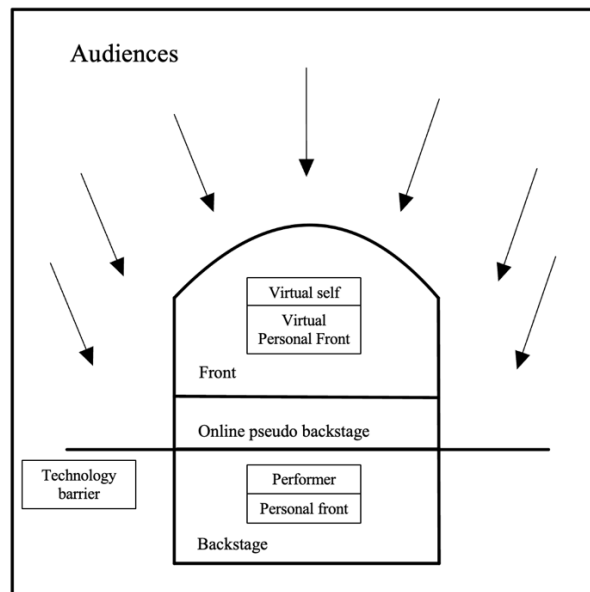

Figure 2: Stage area in online interaction.

3.4. The Emergence of the Online Pseudo Backstage

The online pseudo backstage is the area between the front and backstage (as shown in Figure 2), but it differs from the "central area" proposed by Melowitz. "Central area" refers to the fact that the backstage of an actor is unconsciously exposed to the front by the TV media without his or her knowledge [11]. Online pseudo backstage refers to the intentional disclosure of part of a performer's backstage on a social platform. Such content will make the audience think that they are entering the backstage of the performer and can see the real side of the performer. For performers, this content is still front, the planned release of information to shape their online avatars. For example, when a movie star posts his carefully prepared daily photos and re-edited text on Facebook, his fans think they are seeing the real side of the star through the posts. This is the star for their image more ideal, more plump impression management strategy.

The effect of the content presented by performers in the online pseudo backstage can be roughly divided into two ways. If the content is consistent with the actor's original character image, it will strengthen the audience's trust in the original character. On the contrary, if the display content is inconsistent with the original role image of the performer, it will reshape the audience's original role image and play a complementary role to the original role [12].

3.5. The Test of Front and Backstage Management Ability

On social media, users cannot easily access performers backstage. Network technology provides a protective barrier for performers, making it difficult for the audience to observe the whole process of the performance, thus improving the safety of the performance. However, that does not mean the real backstage is completely safe at this point. In addition to performers and audiences, there is also a

third party involved in online interaction -- social media platforms. Social media platforms are interested in personal information such as users' browsing preferences and geographic locations. In the era of big data, social media users leave digital traces of everything they do. This information can be speculated on, analyzed, and exploited without the user's knowledge.

Moreover, in the era of the Internet, the speed of information transmission is high and the cost is low. The damage of impression crashes caused by inconsistencies between the front and the backstage of public figures is greatly enhanced [13]. This puts forward higher requirements on the ability of individual management of the front and backstage.

4. Conclusions

First, individual performances in online interactive situations are no longer bound by fixed or standard settings. Instead, individuals can create and manipulate settings that suit their performance. Second, in online interaction, the audience cannot directly observe the performer's personal front. Social media users can customize their profile, known as the personal front. In other words, the performer's personal front is deceptive. Third, the performance is free from the limitations of the performer's own body and region. In online interactions, performers construct a virtual individual through social media to perform. When the virtual individual performs in the front, the performer himself hides in backstage to manipulate it. This greatly expands the possibilities of self-presentation. Moreover, performers can act backstage in ways that violate their virtual identities. Fourth, in the interactive scene of social media, a new stage area is added between the front and the backstage -- online pseudo backstage. Here performers will selectively display parts of their backstage to enrich their image. It also means that performers can retreat to the real backstage to manipulate the front and the online pseudo backstage, and control the start and end of the performance at will. Fifth, in a Shetland restaurant, the audience may break into the back kitchen at any time to see what the backstage is really like. On social media platforms, however, Internet technology provides a barrier that allows the real backstage to be better protected. That means it is harder for viewers to get backstage. However, the existence of the Internet also means that the damage caused by backstage exposure is greatly increased. This puts forward higher requirements for the individual's front and backstage management ability, especially for public figures.

Above all, in the Internet era, the front and backstage of dramaturgy have undergone great changes. Information technology provides powerful support for individuals to build ideal images. However, people need to understand that long-term artificial performance is a kind of ego depletion. There should not be too much difference between the constructed self and the real self, or it will lead to the depletion of the self. Also, the long-term artificial performance will lead to the blurring of the boundary between the real self and the constructed self, which will lead to the loss of identity. In addition, individuals often take the initiative to cater to public preferences and social discipline, which may lead to the excessive pursuit of superficial images and a lack of substantive self-improvement. For example, stars create fake and fragile people to set masks to meet the needs of the market and fans, to achieve the purpose of earning traffic and enhancing commercial value. This phenomenon which is not worthy of the name, should also prove the vicious circle proposed by the theory of culture industry: tool rationality overcomes value rationality, and use value is subject to exchange value. Therefore, people need to properly understand and use Internet technology to bring performance convenience in social interaction.

Most of the existing studies based on dramaturgy take it as a theoretical perspective to explore and explain the social interaction behavior in a certain situation. This study explores the applicability and changes of dramaturgy in today's Internet era, reflects on and develops dramaturgy in social media, and provides certain inspiration for readers to think about the relationship between interpersonal interaction and social media.

Social media is a very broad concept and scope, including a variety of different function-oriented network platforms. Each platform has its unique features, functions, and demographics. This study only reflects on dramaturgy by summarizing the common characteristics of most social media, and the conclusion is general and macroscopic. However, the impression management of users on different types of social media platforms is bound to be different to some extent. Future relevant studies can focus more on the discussion of dramaturgy in various kinds of social media. In addition, in recent years, live broadcasts as the main form of the platform hotter and hotter, this is undoubtedly a new topic worth discussing.

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