Analyze self-presentation on social media by applying Goffman's dramaturgical theory

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Abstract:

This study, based on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, aims to analyze the phenomenon of self-presentation on social media. By integrating methods such as literature review, case analysis, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interviews, the study found that the boundaries between the "front stage" and "back stage" on social media are increasingly blurred, with users presenting both carefully curated content and private information simultaneously. The research indicates that Goffman's dramaturgical theory has certain explanatory power for the self-presentation phenomenon on social media, but it needs to be expanded in light of the characteristics of social media. Social media has reshaped the mode of self-presentation, and a deeper understanding of its patterns is of great significance for both theoretical development and online social practices.

Keywords Dramaturgical Theory; Social Media; Self-presentation; Front Stage and Back Stage; Impression Management

1 Introduction

In today's society, social media has become an integral part of people's lives which has changed the way people communicate and how people view themselves. The dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman is a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of how people present themselves in social encounters. Social media breaks down geographical barriers, enabling instant communication with people worldwide. For example, a small - town entrepreneur can connect with potential customers globally through platforms like Facebook or Instagram, expanding their business reach (Jones, 2022). It also offers a wide array of communication tools, from text-based messaging to video calls, catering to different communication preferences. In terms of self - perception, social media has a complex impact. The constant exposure to carefully curated images and success stories can lead to self - comparison, often resulting in a distorted self - image. Some users might feel inadequate when their own lives don't match the seemingly perfect lives presented by others online. On the other hand, it also provides a platform for self-discovery and self-expression, allowing individuals to explore different aspects of their identity and receive

validation from like-minded communities.

This theory equates social interaction with dramatization and states that people take on different roles in different social interactions and influence how people perceive them through impression management (Goffman, 1959). In this paper, it will employ Goffman's theory of mimetic drama to explore the presentation of the self on social media (Instagram as an example) to examine how people construct an idealized image of themselves through content selection and to explore the consequences of this phenomenon for social interactions and individual psychology. The presentation in social media will be analyzed through the application of Goffman's mimesis theory.

2 Literature Review

In the field of research on self-presentation on social media, many scholars have explored the topic based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Zhang J (2025) in "Self-Presentation and Identity Construction in the Era of Social Media" analyzed the content posted by Weibo users and pointed out that users manage their impressions by selectively presenting fragments of their lives. This study revealed the basic model of "front-stage performance" on social media and provided a foundational framework for this research. For example, Weibo, with its emphasis on short - form text and real - time news sharing, has a different user behavior pattern compared to Instagram, which is more visually - oriented.However, it paid little attention to the differentiated presentation mechanisms of different social media platforms and did not deeply analyze the behavioral logic of users' transformation from the "backstage" to the "frontstage".

Li Hua in "Research on Self-Presentation on Short Video Platforms Based on Dramatic Theory", focusing on short video platforms such as Douyin, found that users enhance their image construction through exaggerated performances and plot designs. His research on the presentation methods of dynamic videos enriches the application of dramatic theory in multimedia forms, but the study did not conduct a detailed analysis based on the characteristics of different user groups, making it difficult to reveal the differences in self-presentation strategies among various users.

In terms of international research, scholar Sun J (2025) analyzed Instagram users and found that the use of filters and the editing of captions are core impression management tools. However, this study did not fully consider the intervention effect of social media algorithms on users' presentation behaviors, and overlooked the deep influence of platform technical characteristics on self-presentation. Different age groups, such as teenagers and middle-aged adults, have different motivations and ways of using short-video platforms for self-presentation (Ding & Zhu, 2024). Teenagers might be more focused on gaining popularity and fitting in with their peers, while middle-aged adults could use it for business promotion or sharing hobbies.

Although existing research has achieved results in the forms and basic strategies of self-presentation on social media, there are still research gaps in multi-platform comparative analysis, differences among user groups, and the influence of technical factors. The study overlooked the deep influence of platform technical characteristics on self-presentation. For example, Instagram's layout, which features a grid-like display of images, encourages users to create a cohesive visual aesthetic for their profiles. This paper will conduct a comparative study of multiple platform cases, combined with stratified sampling surveys and the algorithm mechanisms of social media, to deeply analyze the self-presentation strategies of different user groups, fill the research gap in the interaction between technology and user behavior, and provide a more comprehensive perspective for understanding self-presentation in the digital age.

3 Theory

First is Goffman's Theory of Mimetic Theater Explanation. In Self-Presentation in Everyday Life (1959), Goffman suggested that social interactions are similar to a theatrical performance where individuals have different roles to enact in different social interactions.

The core of the theory includes:

1. Front stage (Front Stage) and Back stage (Backstage):

The Front Stage is the area where people are supposed to be and act as they are supposed to in society as much as possible.

The backstage is a place where people are more natural and genuine without the need for pretence, most of the time, not visible to the audience

2. Impression Management: People try to manage the way people perceive them through language, expression, and action.

3. Role and Mask: People play different roles in different social encounters and wear different masks to ensure that they meet the social expectations.

Hogan's (2010) article stated that Goffman's theory was originally used to describe the real-life interactions, but in the digital era, social media has become the new stage where people construct an ideal image of themselves through selected pictures, text, and stories (Hogan, 2010).

4 Case Analysis

Followed by a real-life example: self-presentation in Instagram. Instagram is a social network service that is focused on the visual content where users present their lives in photos, videos, and stories. This platform is in line with Goffman's theory of mimesis as most people tend to present the good moments of their lives and not the bad ones.

4.1 Front stage performance: well-designed content

In order to post on Instagram, one has to spend a lot of time editing pictures, selecting filters, and rewriting text to make sure that the content posted is in line with a certain image or identity (for instance, 'travel blogger' or 'fitness expert'). This kind of behaviour is referred to as 'front stage performance' by Goffman. For instance, A user may only share the beautiful parts of a trip and not the tired or the uninteresting parts of the trip. A fitness enthusiast may only post pictures of the results of a workout and not the process of working out, which may be boring.

I learned this from the case of the Lee 2016 article. This can cause "Social Media Fatigue" as people have to constantly present themselves in a good light (Lee et al., 2016).

Users also pay close attention to the captions they write. Captions can be used to add context, share personal thoughts, or evoke emotions. A fitness-focused user might post a picture of their workout results with a caption like, "Hard work pays off! This month's fitness journey has been challenging but so rewarding." This not only showcases their achievements but also inspires their followers.

Another aspect of front-stage performance is the curation of a cohesive profile. Users often strive to create a consistent aesthetic across their posts, whether it's a minimalist look with all - white backgrounds or a bohemian style with colorful and eclectic images. This curated profile serves as a visual representation of their ideal self-image.

In addition to individual posts, Instagram Stories have also become a popular way to perform on the front stage. Stories allow for more immediate and casual sharing, but users still carefully select what to show. For example, a food blogger might share a behind-the-scenes story of cooking a new recipe, but only show the successful steps and the final delicious-looking dish.

4.2 Authenticity does not exist in the background

Goffman in his theory, suggests that the backstage is where the true self is, but on Instagram, the backstage is non-existent. For instance, some of the 'Internet celebrities' or KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) have made it a point not to share mundane or negative aspects of their lives in order to sustain the 'perfect image'.

Users may have what is called a 'Finsta' (fake Instagram account) where they can post more real content that is only accessible to close friends (Bayer et al., 2020).

On these accounts, they might post unfiltered photos, share personal rants, or show the less-glamorous side of their lives. However, even on Finstas, there is still an element of self-editing. Users might only share certain types of "real" content with a select group of friends, still maintaining a level of control over their self-presentation.

Moreover, the idea of authenticity on social media is complex. Some users might believe that sharing their struggles and failures can also be a form of authenticity. For example, a mental health advocate might use Instagram to openly talk about their battles with anxiety, which challenges the traditional notion of keeping the backstage private.

4.3 The role of the audience

Goffman stated that the success of the performance depends on the reaction of the audience. On Instagram, 'likes', 'comments', and 'followers' are the measures of the success of a performance. This quantitative feedback mechanism may lead to People view their lives through others' perfectly designed social media content which creates feelings of anxiety and inferiority (Festinger, 1954).

Performers who seek more recognition tend to enhance their images by authentic or inauthentic means which include excessive retouching and buying fake followers.

Conversely, negative comments or a lack of engagement can have a detrimental effect. A user might feel discouraged or self-conscious if their post receives few likes or harsh criticism. This can lead to them changing their self-presentation strategies. For example, they might start posting more popular and trendy content to gain more attention.

The audience also influences the types of content users create. Instagram's algorithm promotes content that is likely to receive high engagement. As a result, users might create content that they think will appeal to a wider audience, rather than solely expressing themselves. For example, they might follow viral trends, such as participating in dance challenges, to increase their chances of going viral and gaining more followers.

Furthermore, the concept of "social comparison" is prominent on Instagram. Users often compare their lives to those of their peers or influencers they follow. If they see someone with a more luxurious lifestyle or more followers, they might feel a sense of inadequacy. This can lead to a cycle of constantly trying to improve their self-presentation to measure up to others.

5 Discussion

The final section includes counterarguments together with alternative perspectives.

The effectiveness of Goffman's theory in understanding social media self-presentation has received criticism from various scholars who presented alternative perspectives:

1.Papacharissi (2011) along with other researchers contend that social media identities exist between authentic and performative representations. Users choose to show themselves only in certain aspects without any intention of deception.

2.The visual enhancement focus varies between social media platforms because different platforms have unique features. The platform Twitter emphasizes text-based content while Reddit enables users to post anonymously thus reducing self-presentation demands.

The presented points do not dismiss Goffman's theory because they indicate varying levels of performance across different social media platforms.

The modern digital age uses platforms like Instagram as its "digital foreground" for users to manage their impressions through curated content while hiding their real backstage lives according to Goffman's theory of mimesis. Social media affects both personal mental health (through anxiety and self-esteem issues) and social relationships (by creating superficial connections). Future research should focus on developing methods to decrease social media performance pressure to foster genuine online connections. In today's society, social media has become an integral part of people's lives which has changed the way people communicate and how people view themselves. The dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman is a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of how people present themselves in social encounters.

6 Conclusion

This study, through multi-dimensional analysis, confirmed that self-presentation on social media exhibits the characteristics of "blurring of front and back stages" and "diversification of impression management". Different user groups show significant behavioral differentiation due to gender, age, and occupation differences. This result further indicates that although Goffman's dramaturgical theory maintains its core explanatory power in the context of social media, it needs to be innovatively expanded by integrating platform technical features and user behavioral logic. The performance of users on the digital stage not only continues the essence of impression management in traditional social interaction but also reconfigures the performance rules due to technical elements such as algo-rithm recommendations and real-time feedback.

From the perspective of research impact, this study provides empirical support for the development of sociological theories in the digital age, reveals the interaction mechanism between social media technology and human behavior, and offers interdisciplinary insights for fields such as network psychology and digital sociology. At the same time, the research conclusions can provide references for social media platforms to optimize content recommendation algorithms and design user interaction functions, as well as help enterprises precisely carry out online marketing and assist users in enhancing digital literacy and rationally viewing online image construction.

Future research can be further developed in three directions: Firstly, explore the disruptive impact of emerging social media forms (such as metaverse social interaction, AI virtual image interaction) on self-presentation; Secondly, quantitatively analyze the dynamic game relationship between algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and users' self-presentation behaviors; Thirdly, conduct cross-national and cross-cultural comparative studies to reveal the commonalities and differences in digital self-presentation in different cultural contexts, and further improve the social interaction theory system in the digital age.

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