Satisfaction of contextual needs: a study of users' multi-account trade-off needs and self-presentation in WeChat

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Abstract: Social media has dramatically changed people's lives, and also more and more people are using multiple accounts to socialize. Based on self-presentation and platform sway theory, this study uses online ethnography and semi-structured interviews to explore the reasons for the emergence of multiple account trade-off demands in WeChat. This paper argues that in terms of image building, people will have different performance motives when using different WeChat accounts. There is an offline social network online swing in the maintenance of social relationships, while in terms of functional expansion, they tend to have instrumental rational profit-seeking needs. Thus, users develop new forms of media contact based on new communication forms with multi-account trade-offs, reflecting their autonomy and creativity.

Keywords: Microsoft, Multiple accounts, Self-presentation theory, Platform sway

1 Introduction

With the continuous development of social media platforms, people's online social needs have increased like never before. At the same time, the way people communicate and exchange has also undergone profound changes. WeChat, as a social media platform with high frequency of use and wide applicability, has attracted a large number of users to register. We observe that the composition of friends in different accounts often differs significantly, and people's performance in different accounts is not quite similar. In this regard, this paper uses participant observation and in-depth interviews to study the different image presentation strategies adopted by users on social media platforms according to their different role expectations, as a way to explore the public's multi-account trade-offs under different contextual needs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 A literature review of self-presentation theory

Self-presentation is a common phenomenon in interpersonal communication. The theory was

first proposed by Goffman in Self-Presentation in Everyday Life, published in 1959. It refers to the impression management behavior in which people control and adjust their external image through various strategies so as to leave a particular impression in the minds of others. The earliest foreign research on this theory focused on the field of sociology. After the 21st century, Goffman's theory was gradually introduced into the field of mass communication. Scholar Robert Gordon (2001) believes that individuals in the network are actually digital beings. In 2002, scholar Espen Ytreberg analyzed the interpersonal communication behavior in the field of mass communication with the help of the theoretical framework of mass communication: mass communication and ritual texts, and self-presentation theory was applied to the study of interpersonal communication behavior in social networking sites (SNS). Since 1990, domestic scholars began to conduct empirical research on self-presentation theory. In 1994, Xu Ruicheng's On Self-Presentation defined self-presentation and discussed the motivation of self-presentation; In 1997, Li Qiong and Guo Junde analyzed the definition, distinction, motivation and influencing factors of self-presentation from a psychological perspective; In 2004, Rui Bifeng in Interpersonal Communication: the Art of Performance -- Irving Goffman's Communication Thought" in 2004 examined the connotations and characteristics of interpersonal communication from the perspective of Goffman's mimetic drama theory (Zhang, 2011).

With the development of the Internet, the combination of Goffman's self-presentation research and Internet socialization has become more and more phenomenal, and the application of self-presentation in online socialization has become more obvious and extensive. In 2002, Liu Zhongqi and Feng Xiaotian were the first to make a more detailed discussion on the self-presentation of individuals in cyberspace, pointing out that the content of interpersonal interactions in virtual cyberspace is actually rooted in real life. Wang Junling (2009) explored the psychological motivation of users' self-presentation in blogs, arguing that users would form their own views based on others' perceptions and attitudes towards them and further decide their own behavior. In 2009, Wang explored the psychological motivation of users' self-presentation in blogs. She argued that users would form their own perceptions based on others' perceptions and attitudes towards them, and further decide their own behavior. So they would make their words and actions conform to the contextual characteristics in blogs, trying to achieve the effect of "pleasing others. With the booming of social media in recent years, domestic scholars have started to explore the self-presentation in social media such as Weibo, WeChat and Jitterbug. For example, Zhang Jijie discussed the interaction between online communication tools and various acquaintances through "self-presentation", and Ren Xiangxuan analyzed the influence of gender on self-presentation.

However, these studies seldom look at the presentation of multiple accounts in different social media contexts, and therefore do not answer the question of multiple role impression management and "front and back" division.

2.2 Literature review of the platform sway phenomenon

Platform swinging, introduced by Tandoc in 2019, refers to the behaviour of users who use multiple social media platforms and rotate swinging between them.The team led by Tandoc, through interviews with 62 social media users in Singapore, found that users' platform swinging behaviour allows them to cross structural, social and normative barriers to achieve more satisfaction: first, self-presentation, where users posting themselves in different forms such as graphics and videos to satisfy the need for self-presentation. Second, relationship management, where online socialization reduces the constraints of relationship processing from real life, allowing users to manage relationships freely, switching platforms regularly to both reach different social circles and to narrow down or move away from certain circles by choice, without having to compromise some relationships due to certain considerations.

Platform swinging can satisfy users to connect with different people in different cultural contexts and settings, and become an important way of life. In his study of Chinese international students, Dong Chenyu found that the Chinese international student community tends to use two different sets of social media to reach out to home country relationships and study abroad relationships, thus enabling communication with others in different geographies (Dong, 2020). Users adopt a malleable impression management strategy, assigning different social relationships to different social media, giving the platforms different functions and emotional distances, and actually playing different selves, i.e. "plural" personas (Dong, 2019). In other words, users play multiple identities in social media and will use more than one social media to play their identities.

And when multiple social platforms are still difficult to meet the demand, users will expand horizontally on the basis of their original platform accounts to increase the number of accounts within the platform (Li, 2022). WeChat is one of the important places for users to shape and present their self-image in Cyberspace. And WeChat users show obvious autonomous spatial compartmentalization and role switching in different media contexts, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of using multiple WeChat accounts by the same subject, and multiple WeChat accounts become an important means of contextual separation for users. The act of switching between different WeChat accounts is also a manifestation of platform oscillation, as WeChat users display a "plural" persona among different accounts. At present, the phenomenon of swaying within a single social media platform has not yet been studied in academia.

Therefore, this paper will explore users' platform-swinging behaviour in WeChat in terms of self-presentation theory, in an attempt to answer the following questions:

RQ1:Why does the need for multiple account trade-offs in WeChat arise? How do these motivations affect the self-presentation of WeChat users?

RQ2:What are the social implications of users' multiple role-playing in the WeChat platform swing? What other factors reinforce the trade-off of multiple accounts under different contextual demands?

3 Method

Cyberethnography is ethnographic research conducted in the online environment, for and with the Internet (Hine, 2000). In the Internet platform, new modes of expression and interaction have reconfigured interpersonal relationships and given rise to various new social and cultural phenomena, of which multi-account individual identity is one.

This study mainly used online observation and in-depth interview method. Firstly, a month-long online community activity was recorded to understand the participants' performance under different WeChat accounts, from which the feelings and thoughts of internet users in social groups were learned. Secondly, the information was published online and 10 participants were finally selected.

This article mainly used semi-structured interviews. The research questions focus on the differences in WeChat multi-account usage behavior as the main object of exploration, and explore the motivation and role-play of users' social media multi-account usage in the Internet environment. In preparing the interview materials, we developed initial ideas around various behavioral phenomena observed in online communities, and then explored the research questions in depth in subsequent interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted by telephone and the results were collated into verbatim scripts totalling approximately 10,000 words (see Table 1). All interview data was collected and used with the consent of the interviewees, while anonymisation was carried out.

Table 1 List of basic information about the subjects of this paper

Interviewees	sex	age	careers
A	women	23	Students in higher education
B	women	34	citizen journalist
C	male	27	Secondary school teachers
D	women	28	self media
E	male	45	Art Editor
F	male	18	Secondary school students
G	women	56	retirement
H	women	37	Large Factory Operations
I	male	34	programmer
J	male	51	state enterprise employee

Through in-depth communication with these 10 interviewees, we have a clear understanding of users' psychological motivation for choosing multiple accounts. In the process of screening the interviewees, we deliberately selected their age and occupation to achieve the authenticity and comprehensiveness of this research, and obtained a satisfactory set of research results.

4 Research findings

4.1 Image building: motivations for performance in different WeChat accounts

Self-presentation is an active self-presentation and self-performance. The power of self-presentation in social media comes from the omnipresent gaze between self and others, subject and object. The new "social scene" constructed by social media, the user's freedom of self-presentation has increased, and the interpersonal interaction scene has become more diversified and complex, which provides the conditions for the user to realize different image performances.

The most well-known pair of concepts in Goffman's theory of mimesis is the front and back stage. The manipulation of the foreground and background is called "impression management". In social media self-presentation, those realistic eyes and micro-expressions that are difficult to control are hidden behind the screen, and words, photos, and friends can be carefully packaged to give users more control over their image.

During the researcher's in-depth observation and interactive participation as a "friend", it was observed that the presentation of the user's image on different accounts tended to vary significantly.

"My public number is mainly some emotional tweets and chicken soup for the soul. There is a micro-signal that is specifically for fans who add public numbers. On this account I usually play the role of the big sister who knows the heart to enlighten the fans, but I also do a lot of late night emo on my personal account."(Interviewer D)

"I usually distinguish between work and life numbers. Students and parents of students and colleagues are usually added to the corporate microsignal, while friends and family are on a private account. The corporate number does not usually update the circle of friends and occasionally retweets school-related tweets." (Interviewer C)

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault metaphorically proposed "panoptic openness" as a symbol of the gradual replacement of judicial coercion by discipline in modern society and the infiltration of power into every corner of society (Zhou, 2012). Zygmunt Bauman, who has combined the "panoptic prison" with modern information technology, writes: "The supervisors hidden in the central tower of the panoptic prison wield power over the prisoners in the star-shaped wing.. ..the inmates have no idea whether the guards are watching them, whether their attention is diverted to other wings, whether they are asleep, resting or doing something else, so they must act at all times as if they are being watched at the moment." The deepening of social media and big data has led to an ever-present and more insidious sense of regulation even behind the screen. Interviewees spoke of being privately admonished by multiple elders when their WeChat avatars were changed to slightly "funereal" emojis.

"Actually, at first, I really didn't feel like I needed to block parents from my circle of friends or anything. After this time, I'll open a second account. Not for anything else, just for fear that there might be a conflict any time again." (Interviewer F)

Out of the psychology of imaginary surveillance, users choose different platforms to post different content and maintain their different personas in the minds of audiences on different social platforms (Li, 2022). By using different accounts to clarify the identity compartmentalization in different arena contexts, users play different roles in different contextual time and space to meet the personal expectations of others and society.

4.2 Relationship maintenance: the online sway of offline social networks

With the continuous development of social media, offline relationships are transferred to online, and the real social circle of acquaintances is extended to online. Platform Swing enables users to manage their friendships, which not only helps to maintain various social relationships, but also to segment different relationship networks. Users will use different WeChat accounts to differentiate their already established social relationships.

"I have two WeChat accounts, one is mainly for friends and classmates, mostly my peers; the other mainly adds elders, class teachers, internship leaders, etc." (Interviewer A)

"I automatically log out of my work number at the end of the day. In my private time, I prefer to use my personal number to chat with my family and friends rather than continue to work on my work." (Interviewer H)

In his 1973 article "The Strength of Weak Ties", Granovetter first introduced the concept of relational strength, distinguishing between strong and weak relationships based on four scales: frequency of interaction, strength of feeling, degree of intimacy and reciprocal exchange. In addition to face-to-face interpersonal interactions with acquaintances in the real world, virtual socialization is also growing and overlapping with acquaintance social circles. As social interactions in virtual spaces are more diverse and convenient, strong and weak relationships can co-exist on the same platform. Interviews revealed that people with more intimate relationships use WeChat more frequently and interact more in their friend circles. The influence of social relationships in the virtual space is more complex than in the real society. While people maintain strong relationships in the real society, they also have ample space to autonomously choose to operate on weak relationships online.

"Because of my job, I often add a variety of people from the community, many of whom I contact once and then never contact again. Sometimes when I see their circle of friends, I usually don't like them too much. Family and friends would then contact each other more often by WeChat, and there are more likes and messages in their circle of friends." (Interviewer B)

During the interviews, almost all respondents indicated that they grouped their WeChat friends, and that their friends from different WeChat accounts hardly overlapped. Many also said that one of their WeChat accounts was used more than the other, and that the other was almost "idle". This reflects that the social constraints and role expectations associated with offline relationships make it difficult for individuals to express themselves as they wish online. The choice to oscillate between accounts also reflects users' need for self-presentation.

4.3 Functional expansion: the profit-seeking need for instrumental rationality

Max Weber (2011) divided human rational behavior into instrumental rational behavior and value rational behavior. The so-called instrumental rationality means that people regard the performance of objects in the environment and the expectations of others as the conditions or means to achieve their own rational pursuit and specific goals. The essence of its behavior is the rational pursuit of human interests.

In the "imploding" environment, the gradual blurring of the boundaries between virtual and reality has led to the age of simulation. The interviewee responded to her motivation for using multiple WeChat accounts in the following way.

"In a previous Poundworld event where my friends helped to receive cash, I asked my daughter to help me register a second WeChat account, one more account equals one more person to help boost. And I also told my friends about this method, and now they all have more than one WeChat account too, so that they can help each other with multiple accounts every time there is a similar activity, which equals a lot more people." (Interviewer G)

"Now there are many operations pulling new activities only new number to collect rewards, so if I have more than one account I can collect more times. It's like some products that sell features by the pound and only offer a small number of 'tastings', so I can use multiple accounts to 'try' a few more times until I'm full." (Interviewer I)

The multiple WeChat accounts bring the user not only an "extension of the body" but also an "extension of consciousness". Although the swaying of the platform between accounts is a simulation of the number of people and their behavior, not the real thing, it also brings the user itself the "surreal" experience constructed by the medium. "surreal" experience.

In his analysis of the nature of technology, Brian Arthur (2014) argues that technology is only a means to an end, that it comes from the phenomenon and the end, and that it is the purposeful programming of the phenomenon. The user's need to expand the functionality of WeChat has given rise to the need for account platform swaying, and the user's tendency to exploit potential "loopholes" in the platform to serve personal interests by switching back and forth between accounts to exploit the value characteristics of multiple accounts. Elihu Katz (1962) has proposed a basic hypothesis about use and satisfaction: the social and psychological attributes of individuals and groups determine the way they use mass media. In groups, when individual users engage in multi-account mutual aid behavior, other users will also participate by opening multiple accounts, thereby satisfying their social needs as well as their common profit-seeking needs.

5 Summary and reflections

In the digital survival environment, the trade-off between multiple accounts in WeChat has become the choice of many users, and multiple account swinging in the platform has gradually

become the norm. For the sake of image building, relationship maintenance and functional expansion in different contexts, users have to open multiple WeChat accounts to complete specific performances in various "stage" scenarios. In addition, users will control and manage the content to achieve the goal of idealized performance state according to the situational identity, social relations and interest needs.

In the context of the social media era, users have developed a new form of media contact based on the new communication form of multi-account trade-offs, and in the face of the context collapse and imaginary surveillance culture brought about by the development of social media platforms. They can actively adapt themselves and present themselves in a multi-account swing, reflecting the adaptability and creativity of users. However, it is worth mentioning that the role attributes represented by each account seem to help users clearly distinguish between different social scenarios. But the contradictory identity identification brought about by the multiple roles of individuals is likely to cause distress to users. When users oscillate between different accounts, they are also playing different roles in a split manner, which may lead to confusion as users are unable to make clear identity distinctions and have difficulty in stepping out of specific contexts to complete their holistic self-perceptions. Thus, it is easy to further trigger problems such as social media burnout, time consumption and information redundancy among users. Users need to further develop their subjectivity, break the shackles, and seek free expression of self-representation.

It is important to note that there are still shortcomings in this study. In order to reflect the diversity of the sample, the online observation and in-depth interview method we used only collected ten individual cases from different backgrounds. Based on this, we have conducted a general study on the commonalities of the multi-account trade-off behavior of WeChat users, and we have not yet been able to explore the motivations under the deeper level of the common behavior, etc. The above shortcomings still need to be studied in depth afterwards.

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