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Online Networks and Social Change Stream

A pathway to fame: from persona performance to online collectivism

Introduction

The initial concept for the design of the Internet was to give everyone the right to free speech. The online social network is not able for everyone to fully exercise their rights. The Internet has become the world's most giant playground for the most influential game of press and consensus fighting. Both governments and media corporations public need to interact with their audiences on the Internet to grasp the audience's voice, preferences and trends. Also, the individual online influencers need to attract and build their fan communities through persona performance. Meanwhile, governments and enterprises have also found that persona performance and online collectivism significantly improve political and commercial propaganda. The cooperation between the government, enterprises and network influencers has gradually become a popular strategy for guiding and manipulating network public opinion.

In the entertainment industry, fans' preference and consumer behaviour decide the trend of online influencers' persona design. It has been a non-ignorable trend that the mass production of online influencers with favourable persona is demanded by the brands and governments' media outlets. Besides cooperation with online influencers, brands and government outlets might also choose to train and build up an online persona for promoting themselves, regardless of whether a natural person is required to perform. The virtual Vocaloid, Miku, for example. In the "227" controversy even that took place online in Chinese social network in 2020, this strategy proved to be highly incendiary in the local entertainment industry. Therefore, this paper argues that persona performance could encourage online collectivism or trigger online collective action for manipulating network public opinions. From the perspective of identity in post-modernism, this article will first discuss how the social media star industry builds up online influence in a short time through the mode of persona performance and virtual data accumulation. Secondly, it will move to how persona performance could promote online collective action like trolling. Thirdly, this paper will draw from the case study on "227" controversy and discuss how the online collectivism and fandom communities' preference could alter the influencer's persona performance

and even decisions of enterprises and governments.

Identity and persona performance

Identity in postmodernism is fluid and constructed by language and performance. Although, identity in virtual communities could be more experimental and creative in terms of practising things we were able to do in reality(Delanty, 2018, p. 216). For instance, in virtual communities anonymity and online persona performance already became daily practices regarding of one's identity. People tend to project a likable or respectful image in public, whether in an online or offline environment. It is even more vital for online influencers to maintain an impression and virtual persona specific to their audience's preferences. Through edited texts, images and videos, people perform incomplete personas on social media platforms, leaving their audiences to make up the blank with their interpretation and imagination. The encouragement of participatory culture enhances the social tie in the relationship between online influencers and their audiences. The audiences become the "partial creators" of the "creation" of influencers' online personas. Jenkins mentioned in 2013 that for media fandoms, fan's recreation of virtual personas is the foundation of fandom activities. Therefore, audiences' emotion for online influencers is far more intimate and protective than mere adoration from fans to their idols. However, the attention that fandom bring to online influencers only increase due to the enhanced relationship.

Persona performance and social media stars mode

In the entertainment industry, a similar star building mode is used to create social media stars. Social media stars and online influencers need to maximize their appeal to an audience on the Internet to expand their influence. For them, the quantification of their influence and professional skills are directly tied to the number of followers, thumb ups, and retweets. It was also reflected on Mascheroni's finding that teenagers like to link their sexual attentiveness to virtual data(2015).

Quantification of virtual data functions is a key performance indicator in the online influencers industry. Likewise, social media stars are either trained by brokerage firms or existing online influencers who have achieved particular popularity. Together, social media stars will be sent on limelight platforms with higher exposure like talent shows for television audiences. These budding

social media stars' success depends on their online popularity, which is linked to the quantification of likes and retweets. Sometimes social media stars' professional value reflects on the number of followers and received gifts and denotations. Mechanisms are developed for motivating fandoms through ranking the social media stars on trending and hashtags. Under this business model, fandoms of these social media stars take collective action on data modification. Fandoms would generate zombie accounts to fake votes and duplicate comments and retweets. Their social media stars would have a large number of virtual data on the competition and exchange for enterprises to provide social media stars with more public display opportunities and job opportunities. Thus, these social media platforms and media enterprises have fandoms as free labour for building up attentions and absorbing an increasing number of daily active users.

Du(March 2, 2020) recorded that the core concept of social media platform has fandoms' attention, money, and labour forwardly invested into social media stars' competition. The enterprises and social media platforms then profit in both financial and propaganda aspects. One result of this mode is that these modified virtual data had created a misinterpretation of professional value in the industry and a fake impression of popularity. Kollock also said: "With the header data becoming a conventional signal, such deception may be quite wide-spread"(1999, p. 19). However, this idolatry and unfairness in the industry are not in the concern of media enterprises and capital. Still, as long as they can perform their personas designed for and justified by targeted audiences, professional skills are not the priority for social media stars.

Besides, in East Asian countries like China, Japan and South Korea, media enterprises often combine distribution and brokerage business. Unequal contracts like a gambling treaty that guarantees high expectations of profit for the capital are widely applied in the entertainment industry. Social media stars cannot resist the existing business model so they have to maintain the given impression and persona, which media enterprises consistently modify for promotional strategies and are enhanced by fandoms through creative fan works. This mode first appeared in Hollywood. Marvel series of movies and TV series also have a mature process of quickly building a fan base and influence. Two leading actors would definitely present together after the new movie released. In China, the leading actors from a duo movie or drama series would also be on

magazine shots and promotional evens together for some time. For instance, the leading actor Xiao Yuiang and Taiwan actor Joseph Zeng from the recent popular web series *Ultimate Note* (2020) were on Bazaar magazine. Their interaction on the social media platform lasted until February 2021. Ao3, Lofter and other fan creation platforms have published more than 1000 works about the duo. Du(March 10, 2020) mentions that, whether through talent shows or participating in TV shows, many social media stars appear to the public as a duo during the "honeymoon" promotional period, like Chris Hemsworth and Homas William Hiddleston had attended the promotional activities of the Thor movies. However, because of the separation of actors' brokerage from media distribution companies, Western actors and entertainers face far fewer restrictions than their East Asian counterparts.

Online collectivism and trolling

Secondly, the mainstream impression formed and enhanced by persona performance and modified virtual data could drive the occurrence of fandoms' collectivist activities. A common observation of collective behaviour in the online social platform is trolling. In Kollock' article (1999, p. 19), trolling manipulates others' attitudes toward the initial intention post by stereotyping and labeling. Therefore, trolling generally causes a group of people to besiege an opinion speaker or an online attack between two groups of people with different opinions. Persona performance could incite collective behaviour. For instance, initiating a trolling action for an opinion leader with an influential base on online social platforms could be inexpensive and practical to empower his opinions to attack opponents. Moreover, an opinion leader's persona performance helps to consolidate his influence and manipulate the direction of public consensus. For example, Andrew Cuomo, the Mayor of New York, presented an image of being honest and concerned about the risk of Covid-19 at the early stage in 2020 on the daily show with Trevor Noah youtube channel(*Gov. Andrew Cuomo - Leading New York During the Pandemic | The Daily Social Distancing Show*, 2020, 03:15–05:21).With his presentation online, Cuomo thus was popularly supported until the exposure of Cuomo hiding the death toll at a nursing home and being prosecuted for sexual harassment. However, the video about Cuomo's scandal was viewed more petite than half of the views from his earlier one with a positive image on the same Youtube channel(*An Amazing Month for Women | The Daily Show*, 2021, 03:15–05:21). When he protested against his allegations, one

of the voices in support of him on Twitter, the New York Times writer Candace Owens called these Allegations a trial culture of "Guilty until Proven Innocent." Owens influenced some of her supporters to post them together and boycott the opposition's voice(*Candace Owens on*, 2021). Trolling itself has gradually been regarded as a means to enhance the influence of speech. Online influencers can incite existing fandoms to make inflammatory remarks against an event or opinion or carry out public opinion suppression and trigger consensus fighting between different online communities.

In addition, the anonymity and the lack of physical expression in online communication confuse malicious and innocent remarks, inviting a large number of trolls who are not even from online influencers' fandom without the concern of taking responsibility. Kollock (1999, p. 19) also said that Trolling will only stop their success at the latter depends on whether the troll's enjoyment is sufficiently diminished or outweighed by the costs invested. However, in the battle for consensus involving business and government, it is often more costly to lose than to continue to invest in channeling opinion through online influencers.

Case study: "227" controversy in China

Because of fandoms sharing fanworks and materials about their virtual celebrities. Delanty(2018) pointed out in the example of Sweden music fan that fandoms are unprofessional but certainly public relation persons to some extent. The "227" controversy, which took place on the Internet of mainland China on 27th February 2020, reflects how the preferences of the fandoms and online collectivist actions could affect the persona performance of social media stars, and the decision-making of enterprises and governments.

The social media star, Xiaozhan, was involved in 227 controversy after becoming a celebrity from an adapted Chinese web series based on a pro-LGBT novel. His online persona was designed to be a duo with the other leading character from the series for building a fan base on the audiences who were into their relationship. Xiao's persona had also developed to cater to the teenagers by his brokerage firm. However, the trigger of "227" controversy was the split of Xiao's fandom, which the teenager fans organized collectively lodging anonymous complaints about non-heterosexually

oriented fanworks regarding Xiao. Due to the sudden jumping amount of complaints and accusation of pornography, such large-scale tip-offs caused other users of AO3 in mainland China to be unable to use the platform from mainland China. Also, other fanwork platforms like Lofter were suspended from the app store. A large number of fanworks were removed and or permanently deleted. The fanwork creators affected by the ban of AO3 spontaneously launched a serious boycotting anonymous tip-off and Xiao's commercial endorsements against Xiao and his fans across social media platforms.

Xiao himself remained silent throughout the conflict under his brokerage. The commercial boycotts led to the cancellation of most of Xiao Zhan's endorsements by associated brands. Simultaneously, collective tip-offs of Xiao's fandom turned to social media platforms and caused the banning of many accounts of protesters on Weibo. Xiao's studio and Xiao's fans collected angry comments from the creators, portrayed Xiao as a "trolling victim", and claimed to take legal action against individuals who "trolling" this social media star. Many network creators reportedly had received Xiao Zhan's lawyer's letter and death threats from Xiao's fans. After then Xiao's fan gathering was shut down due to many anonymous complaints about illegal assembly during the pandemic. Until this point, tip-offs had become a common weapon for both parties attacking their opponent opinions. During this whole incident, Xiao's image turned from a duo into a teenager idol and then into a trolling victim who might justify his fandom's protective collectivism presented in the conflict.

Since the controversy had brought significant attention to this social media star, Xiao's brokerage company continued to invest in the exposure of Xiao's current performance. So far, all parties in the consensus war are still locked in a stalemate on the Internet in mainland China. This is to say, through online collectivism, the need and preference of Xiao's fans had influenced the brokerage firm's decision. The attention brought to Xiaozhan by the "227" controversy has already exceeded the cost of commercial endorsements that Xiao had lost. Also, online collectivism could override and transform social media star's online persona completely, such as Xiao's silence during the development of "227" controversy.

Conclusion

To sum up, identity in the view of postmodernism is fluid and performed through language. In today's social network context, online identity is an incomplete persona performed through visual language and text, except physical language. Persona performance is therefore vital for online entertainers to maintain a favourable image. Since the teenagers in the digital generation tending to link appreciation and attraction with the quantification of virtual data, such as likes and retweets, these data had become the online key performance indicator for the entertainment industry. Social media stars, whose targeted audiences are teenagers, are restricted to perform the personas specifically designed by brokerage firms. Although sticking to persona performance assures their opportunities, especially in East Asian area. It might encourage an unfair industry value and indulge fandoms' aggression and online collectivism, such as trolling. In a worse case like "227" controversy in China, indulging fans' preference can start online consensus fighting and online collectivism. Extreme online collective action can harm the social network phenomenon, force social media stars to alter their online personas and let the enterprises or even government to biased decisions. Eventually, it would be the media enterprises behind consensus fighting that reap great economic and promotional value.

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