

Self-Presentation: A Video Study of People with Disabilities on Social Media

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Abstract: Statistics show that there is one disabled person in every 17 people in China. Although in real life, people with disabilities are not evenly distributed in the same physical space as the able-bodied group, in the decentralized online society that eliminates the physical space separation, more and more people with disabilities are recording and sharing their lives and using self-media to present themselves. If the able-bodied group does not have the opportunity to contact and understand the life and inner world of the disabled group in real life, this distance is being bridged with the empowerment of individuals by social media. This paper attempts to focus on the online performances of disabled groups, and borrows Goffman's self-presentation theory to study the images, ways and changes of disabled bloggers' self-presentation with videos. Through the content analysis method, this paper paints a portrait of disabled bloggers and analyzes their narratives. Through in-depth interviews, it explores the inner thoughts and changes of disabled people in the process of self-presentation. Rethink what should be done to make the disabled group live a more dignified and happy life. It may also help the disabled groups clarify their complex psychological feelings in self-presentation and not let the collapse of the Internet context and the loss of control of public opinion affect their positive mindset.

Keywords: disability, self-presentation, media

1. Introduction

At the end of 2010, the total number of persons with disabilities in China reached 85.02 million [1]. In other words, roughly one in every 17 people has a disability. In stark contrast, as of 2020, the number of urban and rural card-carrying persons with disabilities who were employed nationwide was 8.617 million, and the number of employed persons with disabilities was only one-tenth of the overall number of persons with disabilities. China's 14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities mentions: "Helping persons with disabilities to lead a better and more dignified life through productive labor..... broadens employment channels for persons with disabilities, in fields such as culture and art, mental health and Internet services." On the other hand, as of December 2020, the number of Chinese Internet users reached 989 million, with an Internet penetration rate of 70.4%, of which the proportion of using cell phones to access the Internet reached 99.7% [2]. In the digital society, online platforms allow users to continuously flow and get to know each other in the platform.

User-Generated Content (UGC) is a channel for individuals to plan the production and distribution of content entirely by themselves [3]. Although the disabled and able-bodied groups are not evenly distributed in the same physical space in real life, more and more disabled people are recording and sharing their own lives and presenting themselves through self-media in a decentralized cybersociety that eliminates physical space. If the able-bodied community does not have the opportunity to access and understand the lives and inner worlds of disabled people in real life, this distance is being bridged with the empowerment of individuals by self-media.

This study focus on the online exhibition of the disabled community, borrowing Goffman's theory of self-presentation as a research framework. Individual's expression appears to consist of two fundamentally different marking activities: the expression he gives and the expression he sheds [4]. In the network society, the given expression is the various symbols presented by the social media blogger and their recognized meanings, including behavior, language, appearance, etc.; the outflowed expression is the perceivable motivation behind the self-presentation, which, together with the presented symbols, constitutes the complete information received by the viewer. In contrast to the traditional context of media coverage of the disability community, nowadays bloggers with disabilities are not only gazed at and imagined by others and then relayed to the public, but also choose to grasp the power given by the media to directly construct their own image.

The research object of this paper is selected from Bilibili, which has gathered a large number of young users with more than 7,000 vertical, niche, and trendy interest circles, similar to YouTube [5]. There are two reasons why this paper selects this platform for the study. First, Bilibili is a platform that is famous for "medium video" content. More information can be obtained from the video, and the text content is more logical and complete. Second, based on the young user group of Bilibili, both the young disabled bloggers themselves and the young audience influence the future attitude of China's views on the disabled group, which is of research significance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Literature Review on Self-Presentation Theory

Before Goffman wrote *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, many scholars had already studied interaction and impression management. William James divided "Self" into "I" and "Me" [6] and Charles Horton Cooley's theory of looking-glass self [7]. William Thomas stated that there is a process of subjective definition between the reality stimulus and the person's response, known as "definition of the situational" [8]. By Goffman's research, he used acting, team, region and regional behavior, incongruous roles, out-of-role communication, and the art of impression management to illustrate the process people go through in presenting themselves during everyday interactions. When self-presentation theory is applied to social media analysis, the theory needs to be iterated according to the times. The face-to-face social interactions described in Goffman's book are different from socializing on the Internet, just as Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* suggests the disappearance of "aura". The self-presentation of social media is not so much a "performance" as a "display". And Goffman distinguishes between "giving" and "showing," with "giving" enhanced and "showing" diminished in social media. and "showing" is weaker in social media. People gain greater control over their self-image, the audience becomes invisible, and the tendency to show and taste the performance of objects increases [9].

There have been a number of previous studies on social media self-presentation. It is mainly divided into three perspectives, which are the psychological motivation of social media users' self-presentation, the psychological changes after self-presentation, and the impact of self-presentation on the outside world. First, the stronger the sense of loneliness is, the more other-centered the self-presentation is [10]. Some studies also suggest that the psychological motivation is self-identity crisis,

but in fact, this collage-style self-presentation lacks emotion and meaning for the viewers, and the crisis of self-identity is further deepened [11]. Regarding the psychological changes after self-presentation, positive and authentic self-presentation were significantly correlated with the level of social support and self-esteem [12]. Regarding the influence of self-presentation on the outside world, college students with low relational self-concepts were more likely to fall into dependence on social networking sites [13]. In contrast, self-presentation is selective and tendentious in the discussion of a public event, and the self moderately changes its performance according to the situation, and isolated behind the internet self-presentation may instead be a release of real demands and emotions [14]. Overall, the effects of self-presentation on the outside world are complex, fluid, and variable, and often beyond the control of the self-presenter themselves. Likes and comments are most of the time a way to strengthen social interactions and broaden social capital, but not always [15]. A study of TikTok in Japan concluded that the self-presentation of adolescents is idealized, dramatized and “pseudo-backstage” [16]. There are dilemmas in self-presentation, and inconsistencies in defining the private and public spheres in social media may trigger different feedback [17].

2.2. Cultural Interpretations of Disability

There is a cultural interpretation of disability itself, first defined by Mary Johnson in the 1980s, as the identity needs of the disabled community and the difficulties encountered in realizing those needs [18]. The history of disability culture is the history of the participation of persons with disabilities as equal “persons” in society. In addition, disability culture has become increasingly functional and committed to practical social applications [19]. The stigmatization of persons with disabilities is implicitly rooted in categorization and exclusion, explicitly expressed in discursive and symbolic violence, and legitimized by institutional segregation. In the process of presenting the image of disabled people in traditional media, the power of discourse lies in the hands of the Other rather than in the hands of disabled people themselves [20]. In the process of studying newspaper reports on people with disabilities, it is found that disabled people presented by others have stronger self-esteem, more eager to be recognized, and more perseverance to face difficulties than ordinary people [21].

With the development and improvement of mobile media, there are more and more studies on the use of social media by people with disabilities. People with disabilities mostly use instant messengers to communicate with people, interact with familiar people, chat and entertain, and interact for reasons of convenience, feeling like a regular person, getting support, and maintaining relationships; challenges to social media use by people with disabilities include skill deficiencies, privacy breaches, and imperfections in social media [22]. In terms of behavioral strategies in the process of interaction, people with disabilities often take advantage of the virtual qualities of the network society to shape themselves in terms of their physical condition, personality traits, and interests, and then adopt different self-presentation strategies according to different interaction objects, the purpose of the interaction, and their own attitudes toward disability [23].

3. Purpose and Methodology of the Study

There are three questions that the study seeks to answer: first, what kind of image do disabled bloggers present in their own videos? Second, in what ways do bloggers with disabilities present themselves? Finally, when bloggers with disabilities receive external feedback on their self-presentation, do their feelings and identities change, and how do they change?

The research methodology of this paper includes both content analysis and in-depth interviews. Through the content analysis method, the portrait of disabled bloggers is depicted and their narratives are analyzed. Through the in-depth interview method, we explore the inner thoughts and changes of disabled people in the process of self-presentation.

We searched and crawled the data with the Chinese keyword “disability” on the homepage of Bilibili, and obtained a total of 3007 video data containing the keyword. According to the definition of the research object in the previous section, the valid samples were defined as the bloggers (i.e., account owners) belonging to the disabled and not belonging to the accounts of the official media or the official social organizations, and 154 valid video data were obtained after manual screening. manual screening, a total of 565 valid video data were obtained, and 154 disabled blogger data were obtained by removing the duplicated disabled bloggers in the video data. The overall data validity rate was low (18.8%). The extracted invalid data mainly consisted of movie and television clips containing video keywords, recommendation videos, related technology product introductions, explainer videos, records of public welfare activities, promotional videos, and related experience videos.

4. An Analysis of the Disabled Blogger Community

The overall gender ratio of disabled bloggers is balanced, and the age is concentrated between 18-35 years old. It is worth noting that bloggers under 18 years old are more likely to have “accidental popularity”, i.e., a video with a small number of followers, fewer video releases, and rougher video quality, but by chance a video with a very high number of views. The reason for this is that Bilibili’s “three-link” (a kind of long-pressing to like a video and then completing the behavior of liking, coins, and favorites at the same time) is an important behavior of recommending videos, and bloggers under 18 years of age are easy to arouse the sympathy of viewers and the favoritism of viewers of similar age, and it is easier to get interaction, and the traffic of the video will grow like a snowball. Another noteworthy feature is that the proportion of bloggers over 35 years old who leave a donation method is higher than that of the other two age groups, which shows that for bloggers over 35 years old, the function of raising money for profit is higher than the function of self-presentation, while in the other two groups, it is the opposite.

Narrative style is an important element in the way a video conveys its message. In order to analyze it more deeply, this paper chooses the qualitative research method and selects three bloggers with different narrative paradigms, representing different groups respectively.

Blogger “vams07” is a full-time anchor who wears a prosthetic eye in one eye and comes from a wealthy family. Her video content focuses on the popularization of prosthetic eyes and beauty creation. Since 2021, she has released 44 videos, accumulated 377,000 followers and 26,874,000 video views.

Blogger “Da Cheng Zi Good Sister” is a wheelchair-bound part-time anchor who has just left the campus environment and entered the workplace. Her videos are mainly vlogs that record her daily life, documenting the real experiences of wheelchair girls in the process of traveling, studying, working, and romantic relationships. She started posting videos in January 2019, and has 63 videos so far, accumulating 77,000 followers and a cumulative video play count of 4.104 million.

While the two bloggers above are young women living in the city, the third blogger, “Blind Mother Cao Shimei”, comes from deep in the mountains of Nayong, Guizhou Province. In addition to her own blindness, she also needs to take care of her son who suffers from cerebral palsy, as well as her husband who has a handicap in his legs and feet. Her videos focus on how the blind mother cooks for her son, as well as other daily routines. She started uploading in August 2019 and has so far posted 192 videos, amassing 324,000 followers and a cumulative total of 95,194,000 video views.

Table 1: Video Paradigm Comparison.

Name	vams07	Da Cheng Zi Good Sister	Blind Mother Cao Shimei
Title Features	With the word “prosthetic eye”; Personalized; Colloquial; Casual	Barrier-free/ Wheel chair/ Handicapped/ Disabled; The most attractive gimmick of the video content	“Blind mother”; The mood is usually sorrowful, helpless and heartbreaking.
Cover Features	Selfie of the blogger; Highlighting eye features; No text.	Simple but eye-catching text emphasizing the theme of the video.	Close-up of the dish or of the blind mother, no text.
Pace of Editing	A demonstration of the prosthetic eye; a “costume change” after the make-up; pace of editing is moderate.	The opening scene explains the theme of the video; The editing is frequent and smooth.	The removal of redundant footage.
Screen Tones	Cold tones.	Warm tones.	Gray tones.
Picture Composition	Horizontal composition with the figure always centered.	Horizontal screen composition; Multi-view angle switching	Vertical composition with the figure always centered.
Sound and Picture Matching	Speak to the camera with background music.	Highlighting the logic of the blogger’s speech.	Melodramatic background music.
Average Length	2-3 minutes.	6-7 minutes.	1-2 minutes.

A comparison of the video paradigms of the three bloggers is shown in Table 1, and according to Table 1, it is concluded that although they are all disabled bloggers, “vams07” follows the video paradigm of fashion bloggers, “ Da Cheng Zi Good Sister “ follows the video paradigm of life bloggers, while “Blind Mother Cao Shimei”, follows the paradigm of short videos with a local flavor. In other words, while bloggers with disabilities highlight their physical impairments in their content, their video production does not follow a unique paradigm, but rather follows a video category with a relatively wider audience. This choice of video paradigm is based on their own characteristic temperament, and the self-image they wish to portray. If the context in reality is based on the consensus of people in real society, then the context in cybersociety is based on the consensus of people in online interactions, which is the “context definition” in cyberspace. The performance rules of self-presentation apply here as well, and no one can break the “situational definition”. For example, if a person who originally follows the paradigm of a fashion blogger suddenly changes to the paradigm of an earthy video, it will not be conducive to self-presentation, and it will not be able to satisfy the motivation, nor can it fulfill the inner feelings of self-esteem, happiness, and identity.

The three bloggers focused on different aspects of persons with disabilities in their choice of video themes, reflecting the distinct heterogeneity of the disability community. All of them also make targeted self-exhibitions according to their own demands and contexts.

“vams07” often displays her beautiful appearance and figure, and in front of the stage, she is an image of “imperfection rather than achievement of more beautiful”, and the special shape of her prosthetic eyes makes her greatly different from other beauty bloggers, and the feedback from the viewers is as follows Feedback from viewers, such as “beautiful” and “the prosthetic eye is very handsome”, deepened her positive self-perception of her appearance, and she will therefore show a more positive attitude towards her appearance and find ways to customize a prosthetic eye that is more gorgeous than the human eye. It also requires financial support from her privileged family.

In front of the stage, “Da Cheng Zi’s Good Sister” is an image of a “school bully” and a “working woman”. She went to college and finished graduate school in a wheelchair, and then joined an Internet

company. Feedback from the audience, such as “excellent” and “good and strong”, deepens her positive self-perception of her intellectual level, and she will therefore show a more positive attitude towards her brain power and working ability, and add “good book recommendation” to her self-presentation. She also shows a more positive attitude towards her brain and working ability, adds knowledge-sharing content such as “good book recommendations” to her self-presentation, and expresses her views on social issues, especially disability issues, more frequently. She often urges the audience to look at the disabled community in a more progressive manner and give them more “real respect”. At the same time, she chooses to share her own life as a disabled person from a positive perspective, showing the warmth of society and making the viewer realize that many “accessibility facilities” are still inadequate, and that there are still many difficulties in getting around in a wheelchair. She injects a strong sense of social responsibility into her self-representation.

“Blind Mother Cao Shimei”, is from a rural family of disabled people with special needs, and has to take care of her son with cerebral palsy at an advanced age. In front of the stage, she is one of the most traditional and sacrificing women in China, but at the same time the poorest and most pitiful. Her self-presentation shows the general public how miserable the life of the elderly disabled is due to the lack of education, survival skills and partial labor capacity. In this context, she and her cerebral palsy son as well as her disabled husband form a theater troupe, and the contrast between her large but unsophisticated son being taken care of by his hunched and skinny blind mother further presents the difficult situation of blind mothers, and the audience’s donations and social assistance are in line with the purpose of this self-presentation.

5. In-Depth Interviews with Typical Representatives

Through in-depth interviews with the three bloggers, the surface motives captured are fourfold: first, to share life experiences to fellow patients with the same condition; second, to simply record their lives; third, to make money to improve their lives through self-publishing; and fourth, to gain more attention from people. Beneath the surface motivation, it reflects the psychological loneliness of disabled bloggers, their desire for recognition, their desire to increase interpersonal interactions in the network society, and their concern and altruism for the same group of people. It also reflects that the profit potential of the self-media industry is tempting to bloggers with disabilities, and the intensity of the work is within the range of people with disabilities, so bloggers with disabilities regard self-media as a “profession”, hoping to ease the pressure of life.

All three bloggers expressed that they receive external feedback during the process of self-presentation, and then the external feedback has an impact on their self-perception. Although “sympathy” and “appreciation” are both well-intentioned, they have opposite effects on self-perception in the eyes of bloggers with disabilities. Authentic self-presentation has a positive effect on interactional behavior, which is consistent with the findings of previous literature. In addition, sincerity has also become a communication strategy, and when presenting sincerity, the self-presenter knows in his/her heart that it is in line with the audience’s preferences, which makes “authenticity” a paradox, and makes us doubt whether we can be truly authentic in the face of the audience. It makes “authenticity” a paradox, and makes one wonder whether one can be truly authentic with an audience. Words like “no longer afraid” and “not afraid” show that external feedback has an important effect on self-perception, but relief from external feedback symbolizes a positive stabilization of self-perception.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Motivation Analysis and Image Presentation of Disabled Bloggers

It is found that the ratio of disabled bloggers to the overall number of bloggers is much lower than the ratio of disabled people to the total population in China. The image of the disabled blogger group on Bilibili is mainly for the 18-35 year olds, which is partly attributed to platform style and audience, and partly due to the different identity backgrounds leading to their different media literacy, especially their different ability to use media.

The motivations for becoming a disabled blogger overlap somewhat with those of the able-bodied for becoming a blogger, i.e. loneliness, desire for recognition, and desire for gain. But there are also differences, such as the fact that disabled people have a limited choice of occupations because of their physical disabilities, and blogging happens to be one of the means of earning a living that they are capable of. And disability as a niche group may be more likely to arouse the curiosity of the audience and thus gain traffic life. As well, due to their identity background, people with disabilities may not have a high enough quality of external evaluators in the real environment, and they have no place to pour out their negative psychology after being discriminated against in life, while the Internet has become a window to receive warmth from afar.

It is worth noting that the difference between the self-presentation of bloggers with disabilities in the online society and the self-presentation in real life is that one is “on display” and the other is “live”. The video works of bloggers with disabilities co-construct their images and can be traced back to the past at any time. As long as the video exists, the image created in the past will not disappear. Therefore, as long as a certain amount of videos are posted to fulfill the purpose of presenting an image, the motivation of bloggers with disabilities to update their videos will diminish.

In general, the image presented by disabled bloggers is decent, positive, and strong, and it varies in specificity, as disabled bloggers categorize themselves with reference to a certain paradigm and self-identity of able-bodied people in their video self-presentation, as opposed to using the label of disability to bind people with different backgrounds, thoughts, and perspectives. “Not letting disability be the main label” is what the disabled community really aspires to be. If a naturally normal person does not have to be strong, then people with disabilities should not be allowed to be strong by default.

6.2. The Effect of Context Collapse on Self-Presentation

When a disabled blogger has a confident, beautiful image that doesn't fit the traditional image of a disabled person, there will be questions about her faking or exaggerating her condition by using her disability to gain attention. The internet breaks down the physical space environment, the environment collapses and the context also collapses, the isolated audience will be based on their original context to generate more imagination. And it is also true that there are cases in which bloggers cheat to raise funds by disguising their disabilities.

With the collision and overlap of different contexts, the difficulty of self-presentation of disabled bloggers increases. In addition to the difficulty of self-evidence of disability, there is also the delicate relationship between individual bloggers with disabilities and the group, sometimes they hope that they can play a positive role on behalf of the disabled group, and sometimes they hope that they can be treated as independent individuals. The collapse of context makes the symbolic representation ambiguous and may give rise to multiple interpretations.

This study broadens the scope of interpretive analysis of self-presentation theory, and on the basis of existing self-presentation research, the self-presentation of the disabled group is studied and the conclusions are explained. Since the disabled group has special social and cultural significance and

is in fact in a socially disadvantaged position, the practical significance of this study is to open a window for non-disabled people to understand the disabled group, and to rethink how to make the disabled group live a more dignified and happier life. At the same time, it may also help disabled people to clarify their complex psychological feelings when presenting themselves, so that their positive mentality will not be affected by the collapse of the Internet context and the loss of control of public opinion. Ultimately, we need to embrace and try to take control of our own lives, no matter what they look like in the eyes of others.

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