

## “Analysis of Impression Management Behaviors on Social Media from the ‘He Gaze’ Perspective: A Case Study of WeChat Moments (Postprint)”

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### Abstract

In recent years, the landscape of media communication has undergone significant transformation. Faced with the uncertain risks of the pandemic, people have gradually shifted from face-to-face communication to “cloud communication.” As one of the most commonly used social software applications among modern users, WeChat’s Moments function has assumed the role of personal image management. Individuals spare no effort to present the most perfect “front-stage” to their WeChat contacts, causing online social interaction to exhibit a state of “pseudo-interaction.” This article explores the communication forms and underlying causes of personal “impression management” in WeChat Moments, ultimately identifying a path to restore the “original ecology” development of Moments.

### Full Text

## An Analysis of Impression Management Behavior on Social Media from the Perspective of “The Male Gaze”: A Case Study of WeChat Moments

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the media communication landscape has undergone tremendous transformation. Faced with the uncertain risks of the pandemic, people have gradually shifted from face-to-face communication to “cloud-based” interaction. As one of the most commonly used social applications among modern users, WeChat’s Moments function has assumed the role of personal image management. Individuals spare no effort to present the most perfect “front-stage” to their WeChat contacts, resulting in a state of “pseudo-interaction” in online socializing. This paper explores the communication forms and underlying

causes of personal “impression management” on WeChat Moments, ultimately identifying pathways to restore the “original ecology” of Moments development.

**Keywords:** social media; impression management; WeChat Moments

According to the 50th “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China” released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of [date], the proportion of mobile internet usage reached 99.6%[1]. This demonstrates that mobile phones serve as the primary terminal for netizens. As of Q3 2022, the combined monthly active users of WeChat and WeChat International (WeChat) reached 1.3089 billion. As an essential social application for Chinese users, WeChat carries significant social functions. To demonstrate “noble” identity and status to others, individuals engage in “impression management” of their Moments to construct personal personas.

## I. Communication Forms of “Impression Management”

### (1) Style Communication Under Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence refers to violence exerted upon a social actor based on their own complicity[2], emphasizing the victim’s lack of awareness, which is why Bourdieu also termed it “gentle violence”[3]. This violence remains invisible to social actors themselves—unseen and intangible. The renowned French scholar Baudrillard also clearly stated that modern consumption has already exceeded Maslow’s most basic needs, gradually becoming the consumption of “meaning” embedded in symbolic commodities. In other words, material consumption has transformed into spiritual consumption; purchasing goods or services serves not primarily for their practical value, but to seek certain “feelings,” experience certain “moods,” and pursue certain “meanings.” The symbolization and ritualization of consumption have become hallmark features of the new consumption era.

The Moments function constitutes a crucial component of WeChat’s overall social design, providing users with a “stage” for self-presentation[4]. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people’s social lives have gradually shifted from “offline stages” to “online stages.” Initially created to record and share daily life—a stage for backstage behavior—Moments has now become a front-stage that conceals the backstage. Life continues to be documented, but it is evolving toward “symbolization” and “humblebragging.” Posts appear to complain about life’s dissatisfaction, yet accompanying images reveal luxury, nobility, and refinement. In essence, this uses modesty as a pretext for showing off. This phenomenon intensifies during Spring Festival, Valentine’s Day, and Qixi Festival (Chinese Valentine’s Day), with Moments frequently featuring “LV” and “GUCCI” at the high end, and “DIOR,” “YSL,” and “CHANEL” at the minimum, causing traditional festivals to lose their original meaning as people become lost in the trap of symbolic violence.

## (2) Social Carnival Under Visual Suppression

In the pre-visual era, the phenomenon of text suppressing vision existed for a long time. “The degradation of visual ability and visual memory is one of the side effects of text’s long-term monopoly over the primary space of human mental activity”[5]. Since the 20th century, with the continuous development of digital communication technology and the internet, imaging technology has matured—from silent films, black-and-white movies, and color television to today’s long, medium, and short videos. This explosive resurgence of visual culture, after being suppressed by text, has its inevitability. Social carnivals are often linked to real-world hot events. People do not care whether they understand the event’s details; what matters is that as social actors, they must participate in the sudden social carnival. Even girls who know nothing about e-sports will post the “EDG” team logo on their Moments, exclaiming “EDG is awesome!” to demonstrate their broad interests and opportunistically integrate themselves into this gaming carnival.

Moments has gradually become a stage for persona construction, where text, images, and articles all serve as tools for building one’s image. People utilize these tools to join the trend-following crowd, attempting to alter social contacts’ positive or negative impressions of them. For example, on October 16, the opening day of the 20th National Congress, Moments experienced a “red wave,” with many users forwarding live broadcasts from CCTV News’ video channel without understanding the context, to construct an image of being “patriotic,” “red,” and “following the Party.” It is unclear when evaluations of a person’s character ceased to be limited to face-to-face interactions, with Moments becoming one of the criteria for judgment.

## (3) Self-Imprisonment Under the Panopticon

French philosopher Michel Foucault engaged in philosophical reflection on Bentham’s “panopticon” theory, proposing the concept of panopticism. Foucault argued that the relationship between the watcher and the watched (the prisoner) in Bentham’s panopticon theory equally applies to people’s daily social lives. Society disciplines individuals through invisible surveillance, while individuals engage in self-reflection regarding their behavior and thoughts. This surveillance reflects control over people’s bodies, and as individuals’ bodies become controlled, their thoughts consequently become submissive[6]. Moments originally represented the virtualization and online migration of real-world social relationships, yet the moment individuals began focusing on image construction, it transformed into a cage of self-imprisonment. People no longer post Moments to please themselves, but to please others. Moments has become the panopticon that imprisons individual thoughts, authenticity, and will. Individuals cannot see others’ genuine evaluations of themselves, while others can see them.

The interaction function of Moments features two methods: “likes” and “comments.” The “like” has evolved from its original meaning of “recognition” and

“appreciation” to an ambiguous and vague state, even becoming another form of social contact. Likes express existence, praise, and relationship status. Today, to obtain likes from others, people begin to curate their text and images—deleting and revising text repeatedly, editing and adjusting images endlessly. In this panopticon of “likes,” people knowingly acknowledge that a like does not signify genuine recognition, yet they willingly immerse themselves in “pseudo-exquisite” curation. During this process of “surveillance” and “being surveilled,” information continues to be emitted, and the “like” movement proceeds vigorously[6].

## II. Causes of “Pseudo-Sharing” Field Formation

### (1) Appearance Anxiety Leading to Self-Splitting

“Appearance anxiety” is a term that emerged during the era of influencer economy prevalence and can be categorized as an extension of “social physique anxiety” in social media. “Social physique anxiety” refers to the psychological response that occurs when individuals worry about negative evaluations of their body shape or physique from others[7]. Due to China’s long-standing patriarchal social system, women’s social role division typically belonged to domestic labor, with wives living according to their husbands’ whims. Today, with progressive social thought and gender equality, the boundaries of social role division have blurred, and women are no longer confined to household chores, beginning to enter the workplace. However, deeply influenced by the patriarchal system, most women remain under the social role of “the male gaze.” Beauty filters, photo editing, and plastic surgery all serve to become high-value individuals in others’ perspectives.

Since the rise of social media platforms like Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu, mechanically replicated influencer faces from assembly-line plastic surgery have emerged endlessly, constructing a new media landscape and gradually cultivating the public’s “pathological aesthetics.” This has been followed by self-doubt about one’s own appearance and full-blown appearance anxiety. As psychologist Lacan pointed out, the most fundamental factor determining individual behavior is the gaze from others. The core socialist values of socialism with Chinese characteristics state that beauty is the unity of truth and goodness. However, the public “cultivated” by the social media field narrowly defines beauty as “fair skin,” “beautiful face,” and “long legs,” causing the public to fall into a vortex of self-doubt and self-splitting.

### (2) Identity Anxiety in Maintaining the “Me”

American social psychologist Mead discovered in studying human introspective activities that self-consciousness significantly influences personal cognition and behavioral decision-making. The “Me” represents others’ social evaluations and social expectations, which can prompt new transformations in the “I.” In social interaction, individuals always hope that others’ social evaluations and so-

cial expectations of them are perfect and positive. People typically live under the “spectacle of others.” Under the pressure of multiple identities, individuals must simultaneously maintain overlapping identities such as “obedient daughter,” “exquisite girlfriend,” and “knowledgeable friend.” To meet others’ expectations, individuals choose to conceal backstage behaviors, selecting only the most exquisite and cutting-edge life scenes to share.

WeChat Moments functions as a close-friend social circle, where most users’ contacts are relatives, friends, or people with close real-world interactions. Moments’ primary function serves as an extension of offline socializing. Offline, people’s clothing, makeup, and attire are among the means of individual impression management; online, to leave a perfect “Me” impression on WeChat contacts, people apply filters, Photoshop, and other operations. Moments creates a network field based on real social relationships yet transcending real-world scenarios. When users post on Moments, they convey information to acquaintances within their strong-tie network while more directly establishing emotional communication about specific matters. Maintaining close interaction with acquaintances allows individuals to obtain self-identity and social belonging in the process of displaying deeper personal images[8]. However, sometimes, individuals living long-term in a “pseudo-exquisite” field develop doubt and anxiety about their identity, subsequently choosing to post less frequently or simply enable the “visible for three days” feature to maintain appropriate mystery.

### (3) Social Currency Need for Value Affirmation

Behind social media users’ sharing behavior lies a form of self-presentation, with social currency serving as the tool to shape self-image. The production and circulation of social currency are not for exchanging goods but for obtaining positive evaluations and favorable impressions from others in social activities[9]. As social animals, individuals need continuous praise from others in social interactions. As a social APP, WeChat’s “like” function on Moments serves the function of social currency. Individuals analyze others’ impressions of themselves through “liking” behavior.

The reason “likes” can fulfill the function of social currency lies in the underlying logic that they represent others’ value affirmation of the individual, achieving recognition and certification at the spiritual level. In recent years, the activity of self-media has brought group “worship of appearance” to its peak, placing the entire society in a distorted and pathological aesthetic state, causing individuals’ definition of beauty to deviate significantly. Based on this, to obtain value affirmation from social contacts and exchange for more social currency, individuals move all beautiful things to the “front stage” and mobilize all available resources to curate their Moments.

### III. Pathways for Transformation from “Male Gaze” to “Self-Gaze”

#### (1) Self-Appreciation: Breaking the Power Game Behind Aesthetic Solidification

The primary solidification of female aesthetics formed in patriarchal society, where “women adorn themselves to please men” became commodities and objects for male viewing. In the most aesthetically distorted eras, the focus of male gaze shifted from the face to the feet, considering “three-inch golden lotuses” as beautiful. During feudal society, women took pride in “the male gaze.” Today, under the influence of consumerist ideology, media enhances the credibility of fashion communication content through opinion leaders and agenda-setting, thereby creating a sense of inevitability and rationality for fashion’s existence[10]. Women appear to have escaped “the male gaze,” shifting from “adorning for those who please them” to “adorning for self-pleasure,” but in reality, they fall into a secondary aesthetic solidification constructed by media spectacle.

Previously, actress Zhang Meng underwent plastic surgery because her boyfriend was dissatisfied, which ruined her acting career. More recently, Taiwanese female artist Sun Muchen nearly lost her life getting a nose job during postpartum confinement. These are extreme irrational behaviors caused by aesthetic solidification. To break the aesthetic bad habits of patriarchal society and media spectacle society, containment must start at the source. It is recommended to strengthen guidance for audiences to shape diverse aesthetic standards and form correct appearance cognition: appearance is not the only presentation method of self-worth. Only by recognizing and appreciating one’s unique beauty can individuals avoid becoming pawns manipulated by capital[11].

#### (2) Advocating the “I”: Reconstructing the Thinking Logic Behind Cognitive Schemas

Driven by consumerism, beauty has gradually become linked with upper-class society, and possessing beauty indirectly grants access to social power. Even those in lower social strata deliberately create a “pseudo-upper-class” consumption state—an impression management method adopted by most users. Under the guidance of symbolic and ritual logic, audiences lose independent self-cognition and judgment before symbolized products co-constructed by capital, media, KOLs, consumer clusters, and consumers themselves, misjudging their own needs and falling into collectively constructed consumerist fervor, obtaining consumer-style self-satisfaction and self-actualization with the support of media content[12].

Fundamentally, the pseudo-environment constructed by media shapes the public’s irrational cognitive schemas, followed by competition, jealousy, showing off, and vanity—pathological aesthetic structures that permeate major social media platforms represented by WeChat Moments. The “beauty” shaped by capital is

flawless and endless. Without forming rational cognitive schemas about appearance and blindly following trends, the process of disciplining and transforming the body is destined to be painful and lengthy. In this game of “shaping” and “being shaped” between capital and the public, capital undoubtedly becomes the biggest winner. The public and relevant departments should cooperate dynamically, unite against a common enemy, and jointly break the “wall” co-built by consumerism, jumping out of the rituals that discipline the body and spirit to collectively create a healthy ecological environment for WeChat Moments and return to its original intention.

### **(3) Self-Improvement: Escaping the Marketing Traps Behind Consumerism**

In the social media era, the marketing traps woven by consumerism first manifest as sociality. WeChat Moments, as a strongly connected social function, promotes the prevalence of “show-off culture” and “sharing culture.” Social media (WeChat Moments) provides convenience and a stage for consumers to engage in “meaning consumption” of commodities and obtain so-called “pleasure”[13]. In other words, the ultimate goal of consumption is daily communication and notification. Compared with face-to-face communication, this mediated notification contains an invisible competition, fulfilling human needs for victory and defeat through “invisible competition.” At this point, consumption and sociality merge.

Under consumerist domination, the symbolic meaning of goods or services exceeds their use value, with individuals gradually using these so-called symbolic meanings as special signs to distinguish living standards and social status. Essentially, this represents a pathological consumption view dominated by capital. To address this, on one hand, we must emphasize the cultivation of spiritual worldviews, correct deviated consumption views, fully understand that the essence of commodities lies in their use value rather than “meaning” value, and reduce material consumption desires. On the other hand, we must uphold Marxist critical perspectives, dialectically view cultural products and services, recognizing that while consumption aims to improve life quality, it is by no means the ultimate goal of life—never putting the cart before the horse.

“Impression management” has deeply entangled the public in the symbolic imagination woven by capital power in a special way. Individuals attempt to demonstrate their “unique” identity and status through pretense, but the essence of this game is that individuals imprison themselves. The brilliance of capital lies in the fact that even when individuals know this is a marketing trap, they remain willing participants unable to extricate themselves. Due to its strongly connected social attributes, WeChat Moments possesses relative closedness compared to other social media platforms. Users’ long-term “impression management” of Moments will blur the true concept of sociality. Therefore, individuals must not only break long-solidified aesthetic standards and reconstruct cognitive schemas about “beauty,” but also recognize the cage of “symbolic competition”

built by capital and escape the marketing traps of consumerism. Platforms and relevant departments must also work together to protect the “original ecology” of WeChat Moments.

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