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Postprint: Reverse Self-Presentation in Generation Z Youth’s Social Media Practices

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Abstract

Under the strong penetration of mobile and social technologies, social media practices shaped through smartphones, tablets, and other terminals have become a defining feature of daily life for “Generation Z” youth. Generation Z primarily refers to those born between 1995 and 2005, a cohort deeply immersed in internet technology and long accustomed to online social media—hence also known as the “Internet Generation” or “Digital Natives.” Influenced by network technologies, Generation Z youth demo...

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Preamble

Under the strong penetration of mobile and social technologies, social media practices shaped through smartphones, tablets, and other terminals have become a defining feature of daily life for “Generation Z” youth. Generation Z primarily refers to those born between 1995 and 2005, a cohort deeply immersed in internet technology and long accustomed to online social media—hence also known as the “Internet Generation” or “Digital Natives.” Influenced by network technologies, Generation Z youth demonstrate a greater willingness to...

The “Reverse” Expression of Self-Presentation

In Erving Goffman’s view, daily life constitutes a performative stage wherein interpersonal interaction embodies a situational discourse of self-presentation. This self-presentation primarily employs “visible” front-stage symbols—language, expressions, gestures—for “impression management,” thereby shaping one’s image in others’ minds. However, as media technologies continue to evolve, Goffman’s theory of self-presentation based on face-to-face interaction can no longer fully explain self-expression dominated by new technologies.

Consequently, scholars such as Meyrowitz and Boyd have continuously expanded the interpretive boundaries of self-presentation's situational discourse. In particular, Boyd and colleagues have reconstructed the concept of "context collapse" based on platform affordances to explain how social media engenders the intertwining of multiple self-presentation contexts. Self-presentation has thus been continually updated and refined through media technological change, forming a relatively complete theoretical spectrum centered on self-disclosure and impression management.

Nevertheless, Generation Z youth's social media practices exhibit stronger agency and privacy awareness. While immersed in social media interactions, they simultaneously emphasize the "erasure" of their self-presentation traces. Therefore, using "self-presentation" alone to summarize youth media usage would overlook the actively chosen behavior of "anti-disclosure." Anti-disclosure represents a reverse expression of self-presentation, manifesting in two primary ways: first, through usage behaviors that contradict conventional self-presentation; and second, by employing non-standard social media practices to break free from existing constraints, thereby achieving more flexible and liberated self-expression.

Characteristic Forms of Youth "Reverse" Self-Presentation

Generation Z youth have gradually evolved their social media "anti-disclosure" practices into behaviors that contradict self-presentation, represented by self-erasure and limiting visibility, as well as the non-standard usage behavior of account switching.

First, self-erasure. Self-erasure refers to youth practices of reducing the visibility of previously published social media content through deletion, hiding, and other methods.[1] As the primary mode of self-erasure, deletion constructs an imaginative discourse for self-interpretation in social media practice, forming a reverse expression distinct from traditional networked "self-presentation." By permanently erasing their own "data traces," youth achieve a data-driven disconnection from past events or states, facilitating faster forgetting, replacement, or personal growth. In their social media practices, life upheavals and negative evaluations constitute important content for deletion. When youth encounter setbacks or difficulties in real life, their inner melancholy influences their media usage, prompting them to delete previously presented beautiful scenes from their social media feeds—whether as a declaration of relationship termination by erasing couple-related posts after a breakup, or as digital disconnection after an event's timeliness has dissipated. Additionally, youth selectively erase other evaluative information that affects their emotions and mood, such as deleting WeChat Moments posts with poor interaction data or using deletion to terminate disharmonious information on social media.

Second, limiting visibility. Limiting visibility refers to behaviors that reduce social media content visibility by setting scope restrictions, time limits, or

decreasing update frequency. Influenced by online culture, Generation Z youth possess both strong expressive desires and engage in “anti-disclosure” practices based on privacy, boundaries, and related concerns. This primarily manifests as youth limiting the frequency and scope of their content presentation by pausing or stopping updates, or by only expressing specific events. Furthermore, youth leverage social media functions to adjust visibility. For instance, many youth establish friend groups in the acquaintance-based WeChat Moments and select partial visibility when posting, fulfilling their restrictive imagination of information dissemination.

Third, account switching. Account switching is a social media usage strategy that enables youth to satisfy their diversified self-presentation needs. It can manifest as multi-account practices through creating alternate accounts (“small accounts”) or as a strategic practice of switching between different social media platforms. On one hand, by creating multiple accounts, youth carve out new expressive spaces for themselves without completely abandoning their original accounts. Instead, they temporarily escape their established personal frameworks through new accounts, expressing a self-presentation that differs from or even completely contradicts their primary persona on these “small accounts.” On the other hand, youth also select different display platforms based on the content attributes of their self-presentation, thereby reducing risks such as performance failure or context collapse. Since these practices differ from conventional self-disclosure and impression management, they can be regarded as a form of reverse self-presentation.

Generative Drivers of Youth “Reverse” Self-Presentation

In social media practice, Generation Z youth’s reverse self-presentation results from multiple drivers, including profound technological influence, complex situational intertwining, and individual internal recognition.

First, technical affordances provide the material foundation for reverse self-presentation. Technical affordance refers to the possibilities of various outcomes produced when behavioral subjects actively and continuously interact with technical subjects in different situations.[2] Social media, built upon the internet’s “connection” function, has mediated people’s communication activities, freeing them from physical space constraints of traditional interpersonal interaction and thereby creating more possibilities for reverse self-presentation. This mediation manifests in two ways: on one hand, in physically absent cyberspace, individuals can break free from physiological trait constraints and achieve flexible, diverse self-expression by autonomously setting personal information on web pages and apps; on the other hand, youth employ the asynchronicity of social media for reverse self-presentation—that is, they can freely choose what content audiences see without considering “performance failure” caused by temporal or spatial conflicts. Additionally, social media’s simple registration processes and diversified platforms provide possibilities for youth identity concealment, requiring only a phone number and basic personal

information to obtain...

Second, situational overlap enhances the practical motivation for reverse self-presentation. Social media brings together audiences from multiple situations onto the same platform. Diverse relationship networks and complex social contexts mean youth self-presentation cannot focus solely on carefully crafted individual presentation but must also attend to uncontrollable natural information leakage to avoid context collapse in complex situations. In concurrently connected social media, youth increasingly struggle to cope with diverse audiences and overlapping situations, creating social media expression anxiety and obstacles. Based on concerns about context collapse under situational overlap, youth must consider different users' acceptance of content more carefully when showing their own dynamics, greatly increasing the difficulty of self-presentation. Consequently, youth employ reverse self-presentation practices such as limiting visibility or account switching to seek a delicate balance between strong expressive desires and complex social situations.

Third, youth social media fatigue constitutes a key driver of reverse self-presentation. Individual-level perception represents an important dimension for analyzing the generative drivers of youth reverse self-presentation, with social media fatigue being an extremely crucial practical driver at the individual perception level. Social media fatigue refers to the exhaustion, boredom, or weariness that users experience during social media use due to personal, platform, and social factors[3], which influences users' social media usage intentions and specific behaviors. Youth social media fatigue has become increasingly prominent: on one hand, the complexity of most youth social networks has far exceeded Dunbar's number of 150 as the cognitive limit for social relationships. Constrained by maintaining their constructed social media image, youth must constantly consider the consistency of their disclosures and visibility for different friends, consuming substantial energy and generating social pressure. On the other hand, excessive attention to interaction data such as likes and comments on social media blurs the boundary between individuals' inner worlds and external reality, easily triggering cognitive crises and generating social media fatigue, which leads youth to employ reverse presentation methods to alleviate social pressure.

Generation Z youth's reverse self-presentation is not the opposite of self-presentation but rather a dynamic balance they seek while maintaining existing stable relationships and meeting diverse expressive needs. The three reverse expression strategies—self-erasure, limiting visibility, and account switching—are not clearly distinct but exhibit varying degrees of crossover and overlap, building a safe space for youth in the social media era where front-stage and back-stage boundaries are gradually dissolving. However, in today's increasingly complex social networks, relying solely on youth reverse self-presentation remains insufficient to resolve the contradiction between internal self-identity and external socialized expression, and appropriate coping strategies still require...

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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