

An Analysis of the Mechanism of the Red Note Check-in Behavior Based on Dramaturgy Theory

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Abstract. In today's era of social media, The Red Note, as a representative lifestyle social platform in China, has cultivated a unique content ecology centered on "authentic sharing" and "seeding communication" since its establishment. Among millions of posts, check-in behavior seems to be significant and prevalent. Hence, this article probes into this phenomenon based on dramaturgical theory, which serves as the core analytical framework. This study concludes that check-in behavior on The Red Note is not a simple act of daily logging, but rather an active performance for impression management. Grounded in Goffman's dramaturgical theory, users strategically craft an "ideal persona" for the front stage while concealing contradictory information in the back stage. This performance, employing strategies such as "theme selection," "prop utilization," and "feedback solicitation," constructs three archetypal virtual models: goal-oriented, experiential, and community-based, which are deeply intertwined with the platform's "seeding culture." Ultimately, this performance-based user interaction, by reinforcing or adjusting their personas, not only strengthens users' self-identity but also forms the core mechanism for the platform to maintain user stickiness and achieve sustainable growth.

Keywords: check-in behavior, drama theory, front-end design, back-end hidden, user stickiness

1. Introduction

Excluding other papers about check-in behavior, in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, Qiao [1] analyzed how Red Note check-in behavior affects the appearance of the city; Fang [2] breaks down that check-in behavior can let bloggers express themselves; Liu [3] analyzed how popular check-in spots convey emotion. However, few studies focus on how check-in behavior is related to dramaturgical theory, leaving a research gap. This paper first clarifies the definition of check-in behavior, which refers to people post their behaviors or scenery on the social media such as the red note. It usually includes landscape photography, such as daily activities like reciting vocabulary or exercising. Then applies Goffman's dramaturgical theory to analyse underlying mechanics. This research dissects check-in behaviour and "seeding-culture", providing theoretical references and bedding for spread of other cultures on social platforms.

2. The connotation and pattern of manifestation of check-in behavior on The Red Note

Check-in behavior on this platform can be divided into four branches: goal-tracking based, scene and experience based, and interest and community based.

2.1. Goal-tracking-based check-in behavior

Centered on habit formation, this behavior boosts users' personal goals by periodical logging. The habits usually include: studying, such as a 30-day check-in for reciting vocabulary; exercising, such as a daily check-in for running; and skill-improvement, such as a check-in for learning Python from scratch. These kinds of behavior usually have a straightforward cycle, for instance, seven-days or thirty-days, often with a picture about learning process or outcome comparison attached. It often accentuates traceability and outcome.

2.2. Scene and experience based check-in behavior

Concentrating on offline scene sharing or life scenarios, users record particular scenes or sense of participation through check-in behavior, and this is one of the core aspects of "seeding-culture" on the Red Note. Some typical examples are: "Food Check-in", that users go to popular restaurants and take photos of the dishes then post them on social media platforms; "Shopping Check-in"; and "Travel Check-in". In terms of content expression, this type of check-in mostly adopts the "image-text combination" or "short video" format, placing an emphasis on "atmosphere rendering". For example, this involves using photos of food taken with soft lighting or street scenes from travel destinations to enhance the "appeal" of the post and lay the foundation for "seeding communication."

2.3. Interest and Community based check-in behavior

Interest community check-in is based on the Red Note's vertical interest circles, which set "integrating into like-minded communities and gaining group identity" as the goal. It highly depends on tags to find people of the same taste or hobby. Different from other forms, it emphasizes interaction and identity. On the one hand, people can present their professionalism through their posts. For instance, some cosplayers upload their delicate photos on social media in order to show their expertise. On the other hand, users rely on tags and big data to find people with similar hobbies and join in the communities. The sample data shows that interest community check-in covers more than 20 vertical fields such as traditional culture, environmental protection, and parenting, which is an important carrier for The Red Note to maintain user stickiness.

3. Analysis of the underlying mechanism based on the theory of dramaturgy

From the perspective of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, The Red Note check-in behavior is not a simple "daily record" but a symbolic performance in the virtual community. Users create a "stage" with check-in notes, and use words and photos as "props and costumes" to shape their ideal character.

3.1. Front-stage design: deliberate content selection for ideal persona shaping

Goffman defines the “front-stage” as the space where performers present themselves to the audience, with all behaviors in this space designed to convey the desired impression. For The Red Note check-in behavior, the “front-stage” is the check-in note itself, and users’ content creation is “designing the front-stage to match the ideal persona”.

3.1.1. Selection of “performance themes” matching persona positioning

Users first determine what they want to shape, ensuring that the theme is highly consistent with the persona’s core traits. For example, to shape a “self-disciplined achiever” identity, users choose themes such as “30-day postgraduate exam review check-in” or “14-day fat-loss fitness check-in”—these themes usually carry the connotation of “goal-oriented” and “persistent”, giving the foundation for the performance of self-discipline; to shape a “professional community member” persona, users focus on vertical themes such as “hand account layout weekly check-in” or “eco-friendly low-carbon daily check-in”—these themes reflect “in-depth participation in the community” and “recognition of group values”, proving their qualification as community members. This theme selection is not random but a “strategic choice”—users will avoid themes that conflict with the ideal persona. For example, a user who wants to shape a “minimalist life” persona will never post a “shopping spree haul check-in”, as this theme directly contradicts the core of the minimalist persona.

3.1.2. Use of “stage props” to enhance performance credibility

According to Goffman, whenever actors adopt a role, they must take a position on their belief in the role—they must decide whether they feel that the impression of reality they will project is “true” [4]. To avoid the character setting being labeled as “fake”, users will carefully select “stage props” to provide “evidence” for the performance. These props can be divided into two categories: Quantitative props are data-based elements that prove the authenticity of the performance. For instance, in “fitness check-in” notes, users attach “body data forms” (recording daily weight, body fat rate, waist circumference changes) or “workout records” (screenshots of Keep workout duration and calorie consumption); in “learning check-in” notes, they present “progress trackers”. These quantitative props have strong objectivity, which makes the performance of “self-discipline” more credible, as they can effectively eliminate the audience’s suspicion of “fabrication” compared to vague descriptions like “I worked out today”. Atmospheric props: Visual elements that enhance the “immersiveness” of the performance. For example, in “Hanfu check-in” notes, users take photos of Hanfu in traditional scenes (e.g., ancient gardens, under red lanterns) and match them with traditional accessories (e.g., jade hairpins, silk fans); in “café check-in” notes, they use soft natural light to shoot coffee cups and match them with books or vintage tablecloths. These atmospheric props create a “scene that matches the persona”, making the performance of “tasteful life” more vivid—audience members can “feel” the user’s lifestyle through the props, rather than just “hearing” about it.

3.2. Back-stage hiding: suppression of contradictory information to maintain persona consistency

A key point of Dramaturgical Theory is that performers will “hide the back-stage”—the space where they show their true, unpolished side—to avoid conflicting with the front-stage performance. This “back-stage hiding” is particularly obvious in The Red Note check-in behavior, as users hide

information that contradicts the ideal persona to maintain the consistency of the audience's impression.

3.2.1. Suppression of "negative experiences" in goal-oriented check-ins

For goal-tracking check-ins, the "back-stage" often includes negative experiences such as "laziness", "setbacks", or "failure to meet goals", but users will completely hide these in front-stage performance. For example: A user posting "30-day weight loss check-in" will only show "weight down 0.5kg today" or "completed 45-minute HIIT" in the notes, but will never mention "ate a whole cake last night" or "skipped workout because of laziness"; a user doing "postgraduate exam review check-in" will share "finished reviewing Chapter 5 of professional courses" or "memorized 100 English words", but will avoid talking about "played with phones for 3 hours instead of reviewing" or "failed the mock exam".

If the back-stage negative experiences are exposed, the audience's impression of the "persistent, self-controlled" persona will collapse, thereby causing the entire performance to fail.

3.2.2. Concealment of "inconsistent details" in lifestyle check-ins

For scenario-experience check-ins, users will hide "details that contradict the persona's taste" to avoid damaging the "tasteful" image. For example, a user posting "Hanfu daily check-in" will carefully iron the Hanfu before taking photos, choose clean, elegant backgrounds, and show exquisite makeup and hairstyles—but will hide the "back-stage" details such as "Hanfu is crumpled after wearing it for a day" or "makeup is smudged in the afternoon"; a user doing "high-end café check-in" will take photos of the café's elegant decoration and latte art, but will not show "the café is crowded and noisy" or "the coffee is actually not tasty".

These hidden details are "back-stage reality" that conflicts with the front-stage "tasteful persona". By hiding them, they ensure that the audience's cognitive impression of the persona remains unified and positive.

3.3. Performer-audience interaction: feedback mechanisms that consolidate or adjust the performance

Goffman emphasizes that performance is not a one-way output but an interactive process—the audience's reactions will directly affect the performer's subsequent behavior [5]. On The Red Note, the interaction between check-in users (performers) and other users (audience) mainly occurs through likes, comments, and collections, and this interaction forms a "feedback loop" that either consolidates the existing performance or prompts adjustments.

3.3.1. Positive feedback: consolidation of the ideal persona

When the audience gives positive feedback, it confirms the success of the performer's impression management, prompting the performer to continue and even strengthen the existing performance. For example, a user who posts "early-morning study check-in" receives comments such as "You are so self-disciplined, I want to set an alarm too" or "Followed, I will supervise you together"—this positive feedback makes the user feel that their "self-disciplined persona" has been recognized, so they will continue to post similar check-in notes and even add more detailed data props to enhance the performance. Positive feedback forms a "reinforcement mechanism"—the more the audience

recognizes the ideal persona, the more the performer is willing to invest in the performance, thereby solidifying the persona's stability.

3.3.2. Negative feedback: adjustment of the performance strategy

When the audience gives negative feedback, the performer will adjust the performance strategy to repair the damaged impression and avoid the collapse of the ideal persona. Negative feedback on The Red Note check-in behavior is mainly manifested in two forms: doubts about authenticity, such as questioning a user's "fitness check-in" with comments like, "Is this data Photoshopped?" or "Do you really work out every day?"; and criticism of persona inconsistency, such as a user claiming to be a "minimalist" posting a "shopping haul check-in" and being criticized with, "This is not minimalist at all, it's just showing off". Facing such negative feedback, performers usually adjust these by provide more evidence. For doubts about authenticity, they will add more detailed evidence to prove the performance. For instance, a fitness check-in user may post a "live workout video" or "daily meal photos" to show that the fitness behavior is real. This "negative feedback-adjustment" process ensures that the performer's check-in behavior always revolves around the ideal persona, maintaining the long-term consistency of the performance.

4. Conclusion

This study enriches the application of Dramaturgical Theory in the field of social media. Previous studies on Dramaturgical Theory mostly focused on traditional offline interactions or text-based online platforms such as Weibo. This study applies it to The Red Note's check-in behavior, by revealing how users use visual props, scenario design, and interactive feedback to conduct impression management in the new media environment, thereby expanding the theoretical connotation of "virtual performance". This study mainly adopts qualitative content analysis to explore the performance process of check-in behavior, but lacks in-depth analysis of users' subjective motivations (e.g., why users choose to shape a certain persona, or how they feel about hiding the back-stage). Future research could employ in-depth interview methods to collect user subjective data, further enriching the understanding of the psychological underpinnings behind virtual performance.

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