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Performing Meritocratic Success on Rednote: A Case Study of Chinese International Students

Xiaoyu Zhou

Smithtown Christian School, New York, USA
zhouxiaoyu787@gmail.com

Abstract. Social media is gradually becoming an important field for young people to obtain information, build identity, and express themselves. Chinese international students study bloggers on Rednotes have continuously shaped the image of "excellent international students" by sharing their learning experience, academic achievements, background of prestigious schools, and career plans, making education meritocracy a social performance that can be displayed, watched, and recognized. Based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this article adopts the qualitative content published by the learning bloggers of Chinese international students in Rednote and explores the performance mode of educational meritocracy and its social impact. The study found that learning bloggers build a successful image that meets the expectations of society by selectively displaying the background of famous schools, academic performance, scholarship, internship experience, and positive growth narratives, and continuously strengthen this identity performance with the help of the audience's likes, comments, and interactions. At the same time, this performance has a double impact: on the one hand, it can stimulate learning motivation, provide experience reference, and enhance individual learning enthusiasm; on the other hand, it is also easy to strengthen the single standard of success with academic achievement as the core, triggering social comparison and aggravating the psychological pressure and anxiety of some audiences. This article reveals the digital performance and reproduction mechanism of educational meritocracy in social media, which provides a new perspective for understanding the identity construction and success concept of young people in the digital age.

Keywords: meritocracy, self-presentation, Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Chinese international student, social media

1. Introduction

In recent years, meritocracy in education has gradually become a significant topic of concern in educational sociology. Meritocracy emphasizes that educational achievements should mainly be determined by personal ability and effort, and takes it as an important standard for evaluating students and realizing social mobility. However, with the continuity of educational competition, meritocracy has gradually evolved from an educational concept to a social evaluation logic. Students not only need to constantly prove their learning ability, but also need to continue to show their

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excellent efforts, so that meritocracy further affects society's understanding of "success", "excellence," and "failure". Therefore, the meritocracy ineducation not only related to educational equity, but also reflects broader social issues such as social fairness, social mobility, and identity construction of youth groups.

With the development of social media, the spread of meritocracy has broken through schools, and it has gradually permeated the daily interaction of digital platforms. In recent years, more and more Chinese international students have published content through Rednote to share their learning process, exam experience, campus life, and future career plans. This kind of content usually revolves around the background of prestigious schools, high GPA (Grade Point Average), scholarships, and continues to be disseminated with the help of platform algorithms, making the learning process itself a form of content production that can be watched, evaluated, and imitated. In this process, study bloggers undertake the function of learning experience sharing while becoming an important medium to shape the identity of "excellent international students," which provides a new research field for observing how educational meritocracy is constructed and disseminated in social media.

Existing studies mainly discuss this phenomenon from two aspects. On the one hand, studies have begun to pay attention to the impact of social media on the identity construction of college students. Astleitner and Schlick [1] pointed out that college students use social media to get learning support while carrying out identity development. In this process, impression management and social comparison play a crucial role. On the other hand, the latest domestic research also found that the self-presentation of college students on social media is actually a kind of "visibility management". Through continuous display of learning, life, and personal achievements, individuals constantly conduct identity consultation and further reproduce merit values [2]. In addition, the study of Vogel et al. points out that highly idealized content in social media is easy to trigger upward social comparison, which makes users constantly evaluate themselves based on other people's academic achievements and personal experiences, thereby affecting their feelings and self-awareness [3].

Nevertheless, there are still some shortcomings in the research. Studies have paid more attention to the general phenomenon of college students' social media use, identity construction, and social comparison. How Chinese international students can specifically perform education excellence through content, and how this performance can further affect the audience's understanding of success, excellence, and learning value. The solution still lacks in-depth analysis. At the same time, few existing studies combine with Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explain the formation mechanism of meritocracy in social media from the perspective of self-presentation and audience interaction. Therefore, this article takes the content of study bloggers on Rednote as the research object, combined with Goffman's theory, to explore the specific performance of educational meritocracy in social media and its social impact, so as to enrich the relevant research on the digital communication of educational meritocracy.

Based on this, this study focuses on the following two research issues: First, how can Chinese international students perform meritocracy in education through the content they post on Rednote? Second, what positive and negative effects will this kind of performance have on the audience?

2. Theoretical framework

This study applies Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to understand how Chinese international students present themselves on Rednote. *In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [4], Goffman argues that social interactions can be understood as theatrical performances. Individuals are like actors, managing and adjusting impressions through interactions with others. Therefore, the self-

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presented to others may not be the complete or authentic self; rather, it is a self that has been selectively constructed and managed.

Goffman argues that identity is not a fixed characteristic; instead, it is reconstructed and maintained through social interaction. Individuals adjust their performances according to different situations in order to gain approval, social recognition, and respect. Hence, self-presentation is not only a personal action but also a social process. On social media today, identity construction and impression management have become more obvious: users can construct an ideal self by selecting texts, images, or videos.

In dramaturgical theory, there are two important concepts: the "front stage" and the "back stage." The front stage is the place where individuals perform for an audience; people try to maintain an image that fits the expectations of society. The backstage is a private space away from the audience, where individuals can temporarily withdraw from performance and reveal experiences or emotions they are unwilling to show in public. On Rednote, the user profile, post content, and interactions with followers can be regarded as front-stage performances. In contrast, the pressure of study, feelings of anxiety and loneliness, and the experience of failing to find a job can be hidden in the backstage instead of being made public.

Impression managemet in also a crucial concept in dramaturgical theory, which refers to individuals consciously controlling and managing the information they present in order to influence others' views of themselves. Individuals will not show their real lives completely. However, they chose the content to display and what to hide according to the different situations aim to shape an identity image that meets the expectations of society. In social media, impression management becomes more obvious because users can actively choose pictures, videos, text, and release time, and repeatedly edit the content before publishing it. Therefore, the self-presentation on the Rednote is not a simple record of real life, but an identity process after selection, organization, and packaging.

Furthermore, Goffman suggests the importance of the audience in social interaction: a successful performance depends on the audience's acceptance. Audiences do not passively observe; rather, they respond actively through likes and comments, and they evaluate what they see. Thus, self-presentation is a collaborative process involving both performers and audiences.

Therefore, Goffman's theory provides a crucial analytical perspective for this research. For Chinese international students, Rednote is not just a platform to display their lifestyle overseas; it is also a place to showcase personal accomplishments and shape their social appearance. As a group situated in both the Chinese educational competition culture and the overseas study environment, they tend to display the advanced educational resources they have gained, their academic abilities, and their cross-border mobility experiences to audiences through strategies such as front-stage performance, back-stage hiding, impression management, and audience validation. International students can establish a successful persona that conforms to social expectations. Based on this theory, this research uses Goffman's dramaturgical theory to analyze how Chinese international students perform their identities and construct an image of success. At the same time, it focuses on praise and admiration in the comments, analyzing how audiences respond to and approve these personas. Through this process, the study aims to reveal that "success" is not an objective outcome, but a social meaning that is constantly constructed and reinforced in the self-presentation of international students and the interactions of audiences.

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3. The performance of meritocracy on Rednote

3.1. Performing meritocracy through self-presentation and narrative reconstruction

The performance of meritocracy on Rednote among Chinese international student, It is not merely reflected in the display of academic achievements or the background of the prestigious schools; rather, it uses a selective narrative used to shape the "successful" identity that aligns with societal expectations. Unlike traditional posts, which display admission notifications, scholarships, or high GPA scores, some bloggers are even able to reorganize what might otherwise be regarded as "failures" into successful narratives, thereby maintaining their identity as "excellent international students". For instance, a Chinese international student blogger on Rednote with 380,000 followers posted a video. In this video, the blogger did not describe dropping out as a failure on acdemic performance. Instead, she explained that she chose it actively by herself because she decided to transfer to the major called Design Engineering at Imperial College, it was pursue a "high-tech" field that better aligned with her future career direction. Meanwhile, although the video mentioned the need to work while completing studies. Overall, the narrative was centered around the concept "Life is a Game", viewing challenges as opportunities for personal growth and self-transcendence, rather than setbacks in life.

This case exemplifies the concept of impression management proposed by Goffman. Goffman suggested that individuals actively select the information they present to others in order to shape a public image that fit for their desired identity. In this case, the blogger did not deny the fact of "dropping out" but instead reorganized the narrative, shifting the audience's focus from "Leaving the Ivy League" to "active choice" and "future development", "cross-disciplinary abilities", making it no longer signify failure but rather a successful choice that demonstrates independent thinking and rational planning skills. Hogan considered that Goffman emphasized that the "performance" in face-to-face interaction is different from social media; on social media, it is close to "Exhibition" [5]. Users continuously display screened and edited content to potential audiences without real-time interaction; the display has strong controllability, enabling individuals to manage their public image more actively. The case embodied the feature of the "Exhibition" by using reorganization of the narrative, applying the audiences not contact with the complete and real experience.

The identity construction of meritocracy on Rednote is not just performance or exhibition; it works together. The posts continuously present the image of success through screened and edited exhibitions. The interaction in the comment section that praises the blogger for being brave shows the important role of the audience, not only accepts the successful identity created by blogger, but also constantaly gives the identity new social significance through likes and comments, which is the "performance". Therefore, this case indicates that meritocracy is not being challenged; it is constantly redefined and strengthened through new successful narratives.

3.2. Audience validation and the reproduction of meritocratic norms

Besides the blogger shaping the successful image through self- presentation, these successful performances also further influenced the audience's understanding and evaluation of success. When the number of Chinese international students continuously shows their prestigious school backgrounds, academic achievements, scholarships, great internship experience in a well-known company, this content gradually became an important criterion for measuring "excellent international students" on social media, and forms a hierarchical evaluation system. Users who browse these contents not only evaluate the blogger, but also unconsciously compare themselves to

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the blogger's background, academic abilities, and future development with it, thereby constantly strengthening the distinction between "success" and "failure".

This phenomenon is consistent with the social comparison theory proposed by Vogel [3]. The study indicates that the content of social media is often carefully curated and tends to present positive and idealized aspects, which easily trigger users to engage in Upward social comparison. When viewers are constantly seeing the narratives of successful achievements, such as university admissions, high grades, and scholarships. They may consider it as a comman standards of success and use it to evaluate their own abilities and social status. Although such comparisons may motivate some users, they may also cause some users to feel anxious, stressed, and behind others, further exacerbating the phenomenon of educational competition and internalization.

More importantly, when this kind of display can get more likes, attention, and followers, more and more users will tend to post similar content to gain the same social recognition. Over time, the platform has formed a communication logic that encouraged the display of competitiveness and personal achievement. Success becomes not only a personal experience but an identity that needs to be constantly shown and proved. For Chinese students, this means they not only achieve results, but also need to continue to prove their value through social media. The competition has extended from education to the digital space, further extending meritocracy from competition in school to identity performance in daily life.

Thus, the spread of meritocracy on the Rednote does not simply reflect the success in reality, but constantly produces and reproduces a social norm about "What is success" in the process of platform interaction.

4. The positive and negative impact of meritocracy on Rednote

4.1. The positive impact of meritocracy in social media

Although meritocracy-based performances in social media are often criticized, studies suggest that the content can promote learning motivation to a certain extent and help learners build positive learning habits. As Lee et al. they found that the audiences are not simply watching this content for learning [6]. Moreover, the video can create a conducive environment for learning and gain a sense of companionship of "learning together" and "illusory presence". The study pointed out that when the audience sees the creator continues to focus on learning, they will have a feeling of learning with others, thus reducing loneliness, enhancing concentration, and helping themselves persist in completing learning tasks [6].

Domestic scholar Yan also found that Rednote learning vlog can provide the audience with a learning paradigm worth imitating by showing the learning process, self-discipline lifestyle, and learning space [7]. This study believes that learning vlogs not only disseminates learning experience, but also shapes qualities such as "hard work", "efficiency," and learning identity through symbolic production, so that learners can gain motivation from it and stimulate the willingness to continue learning [7].

From Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this positive influence does not occur by chance, but comes from the successful impression management of the creator. Learning bloggers shape the image of "diligent, self-disciplined, and positive" learners on the front stage of social media by showing a neat learning environment, a long-term learning process, and focus learning state. Although this performance has been selected and edited, it can still motivate some audiences to improve their learning efficiency and enhance their motivation to learn. For example, on Rednote, many international students and bloggers from prestigious schools will share "A Day of Doctor

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Students" and "Final Exam Week Study Vlog" and other content, with text descriptions such as "there are still 7 days before the exam". In the comment section, there are often comments expressing an intention to start studying or to begin writing a paper immediately after watching the video. This shows that the image of "diligent learner" built by the creator has not only been recognized by the audience but also inspired the audience to adjust their learning behavior to a certain extent.

Therefore, the performance of meritocracy in social media is not entirely negative. For some learners, these images of successful learners presented through impression management can become a positive role model, helping them establish learning goals, cultivate learning discipline, and realize the functions of learning companionship and self-motivation to a certain extent.

4.2. The negative impact of meritocracy in social media

Although learning bloggers can motivate audiences to learn, the continuous repeated image of "successful learners" on social media may also bring a series of negative effects. From the individual, learning bloggers usually show their most positive, self-disciplined, and efficient side through selective self-presentation, and rarely present real experiences such as procrastination, anxiety, failure, and learning pressure. Lan suggests that Rednote bloggers will use stage setting, symbol selection, and emotional expression to build the identity of professional and active learners in other ways to get more attention and interaction [8]. This carefully designed front stage is easy to make audiences misunderstand that high self-discipline and efficient learning are a daily state, so that they constantly use it as a standard measure to themselves, resulting in anxiety, self-doubt, and learning pressure.

From the perspective of the social evaluation system, learning bloggers continue to show the learning time, learning achievements, and background of a prestigious school, so that "hard work" gradually becomes a social capital that can be displayed, quantified, and consumed. Liu pointed out that learning behavior is gradually transformed into a kind of "digital labor" [9]. Learning time, knowledge output, and learning punching have not only become important ways to obtain traffic. It has also won the praise of society. This phenomenon reinforces the single evaluative standard that greater effort signifies greater excellence and that success results entirely from hard work, making audiences more likely to overlook structural factors such as family background, educational resources, and social opportunities, and thereby further strengthening meritocratic beliefs.

For instance, learning content with titles such as "Finally Passing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) After Four Attempts" and "Securing a Doctoral Position" can frequently be found on Rednote. From a non-elite university to a Cambridge doctoral degree. "Failed many times but finally succeeded." Such videos usually adopt a similar narrative pattern. First, they show experiences of multiple failed exams and unsuccessful applications, then record the long-term study process, such as self study everyday, using the tomato timer, taking thick notes, and the end of the story is a doctoral position, a laboratory, and a prestigious university's admission letter. However, many viewers also question why substantial effort still fails and whether insufficient hard work is to blame. This narrative can motivate some learners, but it also tends to simplify the complex process of educational success into the result of individual effort, while ignoring factors such as family support, economic resources, educational opportunities, and social capital behind the success.

This phenomenon is also consistent with Marwick's research on personal branding in social media [10]. Marwick believes that social media encourages users to continue to manage their public image and gain more attention and recognition by constantly showing a successful and positive

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lifestyle. In the content of learning bloggers, the identity of famous schools, learning environment, academic achievements, and struggle stories have gradually become an important part of building the "outstanding student" brand.

Thus, from Goffman's dramaturgical theory [4], learning bloggers do not simply record learning, but continue to perform the identity of an outstanding student. Due to the failure, anxiety, and resource differences in the background being weakened or even hidden, the audience is more likely to misunderstand the idealized performance as real, thus strengthening the meritocratic narrative that success mainly comes from personal effort.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the self-presentation of Chinese international students on the Rednote as the object of study, and uses Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explore how meritism is performed, recognized, and disseminated in social media. The study found that international students not only share their real study abroad life, but also selectively display the background, academic achievements, internship experience, and overseas life of top-tier schools through front-stage performance, back-stage concealment, and impression management, so as to shape the identity of "successful people" that meet the expectations of society. At the same time, even the experiences that may have been regarded as failures, such as dropout and change of major, can be constructed into a new success story by reorganizing the narrative. This shows that success on social media does not exist objectively, but is constantly shaped and defined in the process of self-presentation.

In addition, this study found that the audience is not just a spectator of a successful performance, but participates in the process of identity building through interactions such as likes, comments, and sharing. As these successful narratives continue to be recognized and disseminated, they gradually become important criteria for evaluating "excellent international" and encourage more users to present themselves similarly. Although these contents may inspire some audiences to study hard, actively plan for the future, and even understand the diverse path to success, they may also strengthen the hierarchical evaluation system with the background, academic ability, and personal competitiveness of famous schools as the core, and exacerbate the phenomenon of social comparison, educational competition, and internal volume. Therefore, meritocracy not only exist on education system, but also continues to be constructed, disseminated, and routinized through social media.

There are still certain limitations in this study. Since the study only selected a small number of public cases on Rednote, the research results are difficult to represent the social media practice of all Chinese international students. In addition, this study is mainly analyzed based on the content of posts and comments, and does not combine interviews and other research methods, so it does not further understand the real motivation and long-term influence of bloggers and audiences.

Further research can expand the sample range and compare the differences in performance of meritocracy between different social media platforms, and further combine in-depth interviews or questionnaires to explore how users from different cultural backgrounds understand and respond to these successful narratives, and how meritocracy in social media continues to affect young people's understanding of merit, self-worth, and social mobility. Therefore, social media has not only changed the way success is displayed, but also reshaped social understanding and expectations of "success".

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