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The dissemination logic of Xiaohongshu's "check-in" behavior from the perspective of drama theory

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Abstract. Based on Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, this study takes a deep look at how "check-ins" spread on Xiaohongshu. In today's social media, doing "check-ins" has become an important way for young people to socialize. Just on Xiaohongshu alone, posts related to check-ins get over 1.5 billion likes and comments each year. This has created a unique kind of online culture. This essay uses Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and case studies. By understanding user behavior, how content is made, and business strategies to understand the reasons behind the spread of check-ins. The study found that at its core, Xiaohongshu check-ins serve as users' impression management strategy, akin to performing a show: Through "front stage" actions like selecting polished photos and crafting captions, and "backstage" efforts like scouting locations and photo editing, users construct idealized online identities. Social approval via likes and comments not only reinforces this performance but also accelerates the spread of standardized "popular scripts" for check-ins. Furthermore, businesses harness this practice by embedding "consumerist scripts" that transform personal check-ins into large-scale marketing trends, revealing social media's complex interplay between authenticity and performance. This offers a new lens for understanding digital social behavior.

Keywords: dramaturgical theory, Xiaohongshu, check-ins, impression management, consumerism

1. Introduction

In the age of social media, "checking in" has evolved far beyond simple record-keeping into a massive global online trend, especially on lifestyle-sharing platforms like Xiaohongshu where its popularity has exploded. The scale is huge: there are now over 25 million check-in posts on Xiaohongshu, with topics like "fitness check-ins" and "study check-ins" each racking up more than 4 billion views. This phenomenon has captured widespread attention, and our study explores it through two key lenses. On the one hand, understanding how the app's algorithm helps spread these posts, and uncovering why users keep checking in. On the other hand, primarily to feel good about themselves and connect with others. While research exists, most studies haven't paid much attention to how people deliberately "perform" in their check-in posts and interact with their audience, nor has there been significant work applying Goffman's idea of social life as performance—his Dramaturgical Theory—to systematically understand how this whole check-in culture spreads.

This study focuses on answering three key questions: First, how can we use Goffman's performance theory like the "frontstage" and the "backstage" [1] to understand what users publicly show versus their hidden efforts in Xiaohongshu check-ins? Second, this article adopts a combination of theoretical explanation and case analysis to reveal the symbolic interaction [2] and dissemination mechanism behind check-in behavior through a deep understanding of typical check-in cases and platform business projects on Xiaohongshu. Third, how do these check-in trends actually spread, and what effect do they have on us? The value of this research is that it helps us better understand online behavior using Goffman's ideas in a new way. It gives us a fresh way to look at how people present themselves, interact with others, and how businesses use these trends on social media. Ultimately, this can help build healthier online communities.

2. The performative aspect of check-ins

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory views social interaction like a play, where the frontstage and backstage are spaces people use to carefully craft and show an idealized version of themselves. On Xiaohongshu, users build a highly polished "performance space" through scripting, turning everyday life into a kind of theater. This performative aspect [3] forms the visual foundation of check-

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in culture. We can understand how it's built by looking at two things: the use of visual symbols [4] on the frontstage, and the hidden labor happening backstage.

2.1. Frontstage: crafting the ideal image with symbols

On Xiaohongshu's frontstage, creators systematically craft their ideal online persona using visual symbols. Elements like filter choices, composition design, and text captions function as stage props, transforming ordinary scenes into shareable spectacles through symbolic processing. For instance, travel bloggers showcase highlights using carefully arranged 9-grid photo layouts enhanced by map location tags that boost realism and create immersion. This design goes beyond documenting trips; it uses symbolic arrangements to project hidden identity tags like "freedom," "adventure," or "good taste." Simultaneously, users signal social class and cultural capital through specific consumption symbols. As Pierre Bourdieu observed that taste reflects social position, the frequent use of descriptors like "niche" or "independent" employs cultural consumption symbols to signal identity—exemplified when a blogger adopts a unique posting format to stand out in feeds, signaling "creativity" or "individuality" through stylized design that becomes a mark of their taste. Meanwhile, other check-in formats like fitness journeys tracking "Day 1 to Day 30" body transformations or study progress showing shifts from "anxiety to discipline" utilize continuous, script-like storytelling. This approach not only increases engagement and shareability but crucially creates replicable narrative templates that lower participation barriers, ultimately fueling the massive spread of check-in trends.

2.2. Backstage: the hidden work behind the scenes

Behind the seemingly effortless Xiaohongshu check-in lies complex backstage production, Goffman's hidden space where performers prepare away from the audience. This invisible labor—encompassing scene scouting, shooting adjustments, and photo editing—forms the essential foundation for a successful frontstage performance. To achieve the perfect "post-worthy" shot, users meticulously select or modify their environments. This is evident in trendy cafes that create "dedicated photo corners" featuring pink neon walls or vintage props, enabling users to easily produce content that "meets expectations." Such designs fundamentally transform physical spaces into pre-made stage sets, strategically controlling environmental variables to maximize the likelihood of a successful performance.

3. Chasing social approval and self-worth

Goffman noted that impression management [5] is how people control their behavior to shape others' perceptions. Through carefully staged check-ins, users gain likes and comments that build and strengthen their digital identity. This drive plays out in three key ways: seeking social validation, crafting identity, and creating interactive rituals.

3.1. How check-ins earn social validation

Within the ecosystem of social media, the ubiquitous "like" button and comment section function as a potent from of personal "currency" for users. This system provides immediate, quantifiable, and highly visible feedback on the social worth of a user's presented self and activities. Each like and positive comment serves as a micro-validation, a tangible signal of approval and recognition from the audience. This visible reward mechanism is a powerful motivator, reinforcing the behavior and encouraging users to consistently create and share new check-in content. The accumulation of these digital affirmations becomes a measurable metric of social acceptance and popularity. Simultaneously, participation in themed check-ins like "30 Days Fitness Journey", "100 Days Of Study", "Cafe Hopping Weekend", transcends individual action and taps into a powerful driver: the need for belonging. By actively joining these collective endeavors, users symbolically connect their personal goals and experiences to a larger community of participants sharing the same theme or challenge. This connection fosters a sense of group identity and solidarity.

3.2. Building your ideal self online

Check-in content on Xiaohongshu frequently functions as a curated showcase of an idealized self. This involves a deliberate process of selective self-presentation, where users meticulously highlight aspects of their life, achievements, or aspirations that align with their desired image, while simultaneously concealing or downplaying elements that feel incongruent or undesirable. This performative act allows users a temporary escape from the constraints and expectations of their offline, real-life roles. For instance, an office worker posts "after-work sketchbooks" to show hidden artistic talent; a stay-at-home mom shares reading check-ins as a "lifelong learner". These acts of online self-construction are not merely about sharing hobbies; they fulfill unmet personal hopes and aspirations. They offer a virtual space to explore and embody identities that might feel inaccessible,

underdeveloped, or unacknowledged in their current offline reality. The platform becomes a stage where latent desires for creativity, intellectualism, adventure, or sophistication can be performed and validated.

3.3. Audience interaction: keeping the show going

Goffman's [6] concept of "troupe collusion" is pivotal to understanding how check-in culture thrives on Xiaohongshu. It refers to the tacit cooperation among different actors involved in a performance, where all participants work together to maintain the definition of the situation and the integrity of the presented roles. On Xiaohongshu, the traditional performer-audience dichotomy blurs. Bloggers are the primary performers, their followers are the audience, and crucially, the platforms need to provide the stage and rules, they formed a stage together. Within this troupe, fans are far more than passive spectators. Their active engagement—manifested through likes, comments, saves, shares, and follows—constitutes essential labor that actively co-constructs and sustains the performance. This audience participation isn't just feedback; it's integral to the show going on. This intricate teamwork does much more than simply sustain the individual act of a single check-in. It creates a perpetuating cycle: audience engagement provides motivation and content direction for the blogger, leading to more check-ins; these new performances attract further engagement, which the platform rewards with greater visibility. This cycle is the engine that propels the widespread dissemination of check-in culture itself. Standardized interaction patterns, like the ritualistic Q&A in travel posts, become norms, new users learn the "scripts" by observing, and the collaborative performance spreads across the platform, fueled by the continuous collusion of the virtual troupe.

4. The spread and impact of check-in culture

The evolution of Xiaohongshu check-ins from individual activity to platform-wide phenomenon is ultimately driven by standardized scripts and business co-option. This diffusion process showcases new media's cultural creativity while revealing inherent tensions in performance culture—manifesting through the three-way interaction between content production, commercial logic, and societal consequences.

4.1. Mass production of standard scripts

The massive spread of check-in culture relies on copy-paste templates that lower the creative barrier, turning casual sharing into formulaic production. Successful formats get copied quickly, sparking mass imitation. When one "weight loss journey" post gets 30k likes, it spawns countless look-alikes in theme and layout. This copying comes from users wanting to reduce trial-and-error costs—useing proven templates boosts their chances of success. But over-reliance on templates drains creativity and causes aesthetic fatigue, like when nearly identical photos at a trendy spot get mocked as "assembly-line princess" content.

4.2. How business co-opts check-in culture

Businesses strategically co-opt check-in culture by weaving consumerist narratives into content that mimics authenticity, turning user practices into marketing tools. Creators often earn "promotion fees" from brands or platforms for these posts, demonstrating modern marketing's adaptability while raising ethical concerns about authenticity.

Brands now script entire campaigns around check-ins—like beauty product "loves & fails" reviews, lifestyle vlogs featuring products, celebrity "21-day skincare diaries," or fitness influencers linking workouts to gear promotions. This creates a seamless blend of content and commerce that transforms products into performance "props" and shopping into "self-improvement rituals." Though more engaging than traditional ads, this commercialization blurs boundaries between genuine sharing and paid promotion, sparking "hidden marketing" debates when creators fail to clearly disclose sponsored content.

4.3. Real-world impact

Check-in culture also spills into physical spaces, straining public resources. Crowds at popular spots disrupt local life—like Beijing residents annoyed by photographers swarming. And some people take photos at dangerous highway and tunnel for "aesthetic". These clashes reveal unclear boundaries between digital performance and real-world rights.

Meanwhile, relentlessly curated check-ins such as "perfect 9-grid posts," "dreamy vlogs" create unrealistic "lifestyle blueprints," fueling viewers' anxiety and class insecurity. This pressure pushes more people into the performative competition, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

5. Conclusion

This study employs Goffman's dramaturgical theory to systematically analyze the communication logic behind "check-in" behaviors on Xiaohongshu. Findings reveal that check-ins fundamentally represent digital self-performance: users construct idealized identities through frontstage symbolic design and backstage invisible labor, sustaining content production via impression management. Audiences become "colluding troupe members" through likes and comments, collectively maintaining the performance. Platform algorithms accelerate mass replication through standardized templates, while commercial forces co-opt individual practices into marketing tools by embedding consumerist narratives.

The research identifies a dual nature in check-in culture's impact. Positively, it stimulates creativity, empowers ordinary users with self-expression and community connection, and drives spatial innovation in physical businesses. Conversely, excessive performance prioritizes display value over authentic experience, commercial co-option blurs lines between genuine sharing and advertising, and public space appropriation sparks social controversies. These contradictions reflect the complex entanglement of authenticity and performativity in contemporary social media.

Study limitations include: 1) Platform specificity (Xiaohongshu-focused), suggesting future cross-platform comparisons such as TikTok, Instagram; 2) Theoretical narrowness, recommending integration with performance theory or self-determination theory; 3) Insufficient interview depth and quantitative data. Future research could expand demographic diversity, investigate motivation differences across age/class, or develop predictive models using big data to inform content governance.

Practically, this work offers crucial insights for social platforms: Balance creative freedom with authenticity through transparent ad labeling, diversified algorithms, and "anti-performance" zones that relieve users' stage fright. As Goffman observed, "We are both performers and playwrights." In the digital theater, only by acknowledging performance's universality while resisting its alienating potential can users truly become authors of their narratives—not just actors trapped by the metrics.

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