

# Self-Disclosure and Self-Concealment: A Study of User Anonymous Social Behavior from the Perspective of Mimetic Theory——A Case Study of 'momo' Group on Xiaohongshu

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**Abstract.** In the era of the internet, everyone wants to stand out and be seen as unique. Social media accounts have become like virtual ID cards, where people shape their image and show off their personality. However, in an age of increasingly open and transparent information, the challenge of safeguarding user privacy on social media platforms has grown. To meet the demand for anonymous social interaction and emotional expression, a group of users on the platform Xiaohongshu has emerged, taking a contrast approach. They use the same profile pictures and nicknames to hide their identities online, trying to avoid algorithms that track their data. This group, known as "momo," has emerged as a result. This paper, based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, uses methods like in-depth interview to observe and analyze the anonymous social behavior of "momo" users. It aims to analyze the underlying motives driving the reconstruction of virtual identities through secondary anonymity, investigating users' efforts to safeguard their personal social accounts, their current status, and the resulting impacts. Additionally, the study highlights the potential online risks associated with collective psychology and decentralized responsibility within the "momo" community. Hence, both platforms and individuals are urged to enhance their sense of social responsibility and elevate their media literacy to safeguard online security.

**Keywords:** Momo; dramaturgical theory; anonymous social; Xiaohongshu.

## 1. Introduction

The Internet is a network based on computer technology and communication technology to realize the sharing and exchange of global information resources, and it plays a crucial role in economic development and innovation. China has the world's largest internet market and user base. According to the 52nd edition of the China Internet Development Status Statistical Report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on the 28th day, as of June 2023, China's Internet penetration rate reached 76.4%, and the number of netizens reached 1.079 billion, an increase of 11.09 million over December 2022, accounting for 23.4% of the world's total Internet users [1]. Using social media to obtain information, share personal news, and participate in community discussions has become an indispensable part of People's Daily life. In April 2022, many social media platforms such as TikTok, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douban announced the implementation of features disclosing users' IP locations. When users post photos or comments, the suffix of the information will reflect the region or province of the publisher. This initiative, while contributing to maintaining a secure and orderly online environment, inadvertently exposes netizens to public scrutiny on social platforms. Driven by the desire for privacy protection, the demand for anonymous social interactions has consequently increased, giving rise to a burgeoning internet community known as "momo."

The concept of momo originates from the original IP brand WeChat Pup on WeChat. When users initially authorize login to other social media apps through WeChat, momo becomes the default nickname without any modification, accompanied by a pink dinosaur as the initial avatar. In the trend of information transparency, a growing number of users opt for one-click identity initialization, give up personalization and blend into the vast online community to achieve digital anonymity.

Based on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this paper gives an insight into the psychological mechanism of the rapid growth of momo, the causes behind anonymous sociality and its influence in the process of spreading.

## **2. Research Theory and Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Theory: Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory**

American sociologist Erving Goffman proposed the "dramaturgical theory" in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," viewing people in society as actors performing on a stage [2]. They utilize various symbols and props to pre-design or display their image, using theatrical elements such as the cast, script expectations, performance area, and performers to analyze social interaction phenomena. People play roles according to the needs of social scripts, emphasizing self-role construction during the performance, a process known as impression management. Individuals achieve their ideal self-presentation through impression management.

The intentions of netizens in using social media mainly include two parts: self-presentation and obtaining a sense of belonging [3]. Variables such as peer pressure, desire for attention, and alleviation of boredom play a driving role in individuals' use of social networks. On internet platforms, different users adjust their nicknames, avatars, and manage the "performative texts" they publish to shape the social media image they hope others will perceive.

At the same time, this self-presentation and impression management efficacy have led to social anxiety. This negative effect also prompts some internet users to exhibit stronger initiative and privacy awareness in their social media practices. In interpersonal interactions, they not only emphasize self-presentation but also pay attention to a kind of "erasure" of past self-presentation traces, that is, "self-concealment," which means emphasizing self-concealment while self-disclosing [4]. "Momo" users on Xiaohongshu embodies the pull and run between "self-disclosure" and "self-concealment."

### **2.2. The Research Method: In-depth Interviews**

The author employed in-depth interviews to invite a total of 20 eligible interviewees from the user base of Xiaohongshu, aged between 16 and 20, with no restrictions on gender or occupation. They were divided into two groups of 10 each. Group A consisted of individuals from the author's offline social circle with some understanding of the Momo group but not actively participating. The author conducted interviews with them via recorded phone calls, later organizing and comparing the relevant information from the recordings. Group B comprised 10 active members of the Momo internal group on the Xiaohongshu platform, selected randomly from multiple members for private conversations. Ultimately, 10 participants willing to be interviewed and provide valuable information had their chat records compiled into text form as supporting material for the article.

The author has closely aligned the research theme, designing questions from the perspectives of characteristics of the Momo group, the motivations behind its emergence, positive and negative impacts, and future development prospects to collect interviewees' responses. This interview is conducted based on the voluntary acceptance of participants who have fully understood all the interview questions. Throughout the interview process, privacy protection measures will be strictly adhered to, ensuring that participants' personal safety is not compromised in any way.

**Table 1.** Information table of interviewees

Number	Name	Sex	Age	Job
A01	Wang	M	40	public institution staff
A02	Lee	M	22	college students
A03	Wu	F	26	teacher
A04	Sun	F	27	teacher
A05	Zhang	F	28	sales staff
A06	Zheng	F	33	private enterprise employee
A07	Cao	M	37	bank employee
A08	Lee	F	21	college students
A09	He	M	19	college students
A10	Xu	M	20	college students
B01	Niu	M	18	college students
B02	Chen	M	17	high school student
B03	Wang	F	23	college students
B04	Pan	F	21	college students
B05	Cao	F	24	graduate students
B06	Xu	M	16	high school student
B07	Dong	M	18	high school student
B08	Wu	F	29	freelance
B09	Yu	M	17	high school student
B10	Shi	M	23	graduate students

### 3. Analysis of Momo Users' Anonymous Social Behavior

#### 3.1. Self-concealment

##### 3.1.1. Excessive invasion of the private domain, individuals resisting to protect privacy

With the evolution of internet technology and changing demands in mass discourse, social media platforms have transitioned from initial personal websites and blogs to today's platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, TikTok, and others. These social media platforms are increasingly opened and shared. With the development of technology and the need for legal regulations, users of social media have expanded from anonymous to a coexistence of anonymous and real-name identities [5].

In the past, finding someone unwilling to disclose their virtual identity on social media platforms was not easy. However, many apps nowadays only require a phone number for searching, and certain platforms' big data algorithms automatically push users to people they may know. Simultaneously, in

the era of social media, the internet's search capabilities are becoming more robust. Any traces individuals leave on the internet can serve as clues for others to pry into. Besides, with the effect of big data, it is not difficult to surreptitiously trace someone's non-public online social accounts without their permission. "I think the scariest thing is that sometimes when I talk about someone or something with my friends one second, the next second when I open TikTok, I will brush up on related videos." We all wondered if the phones were listening to our conversations." (Respondent A02)

In this pervasive environment, we are faced with the dilemma of a sharp reduction in the private domain. Whether it is a casual complaint on Weibo or a commentary posted on Xiaohongshu, there is a possibility of being discovered and critiqued by acquaintances in our surroundings.

### **3.1.2. Be tired of acquaintances and reduce the anxiety caused by impression management**

In Goffman's view, the interaction between people is that everyone is acting himself, but not the real self, but the disguised self, deliberately acting in front of others, that is, wearing a false mask to live in society [6]. A mask is a kind of role face, which is in accordance with the values, norms and standards recognized by the society. Cyberspace is now more like a public space, where people share happy, messy lives, but ultimately it is processed and beautified.

"Before I changed my name to Momo, my friend once told me that she seemed to have found my Xiaohongshu account. At that time, I was very scared, especially afraid that she would see what I had posted before." (Respondent B01) It is a common experience that after experiencing an impressive thing, people want to send a dynamic expression of emotion, but when thinking of sharing it publicly, they will try to beautify the caption and picture to create a good image in front of acquaintances. After modifying the content of countless times, there was a big gap between the state of mind that we wanted to express at the beginning, and the desire to share at this time was not as strong as before. Therefore, a group of people are tired of continuing to "wear a mask" to live in front of the public, they are eager to express the original heart on the network platform, instead of always caring about whether the past circle of friends is not exquisite enough, or whether to open the "circle of friends only visible for three days" function, so they choose to hide themselves in social media to reduce the burden of deliberately maintaining a public image. Similarly, there is a popular way to hide, that is, to establish another account on Wechat and only add small number of friends, and this is a "private place" that only the most trusted people can see, where users can share the most true version of themselves.

### **3.2. Self-disclosure**

An important concept mentioned in Goffman's dramatics theory is impression management, that is, when performing on stage, performers should constantly adjust their behaviors with the help of different symbols to leave others with the impression of a set goal, which will lead others to act according to their intentions.

With the continuous growth of momo groups, in line with the principle of putting old wine in a new bottle, its avatar and nickname show a diversified and personalized trend, and there are slight changes in color, image and text. For example, "postgraduate mo, milk tea mo, momo police, etc., according to their hobbies, occupations, personality and other characteristics, they attach personalized labels to themselves in this "clone group", and show their characteristics based on not exposing their identities, on the one hand to meet their psychology of seeking differences, on the other hand, they can attract momo with common characteristics to interact [7]. "I am a momo who is preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam. Sometimes I am under great pressure to prepare for the exam, so I will chat with the same momo as me. Some even add their contact information and now they have become good friends." (Respondent B04) In this way, anonymous social interaction does not mean isolation, but the communication between real people. momo is willing to show their interests and hobbies, and is willing to disclose their real identity with compatible partners, which is a self-disclosure behavior.

#### **4. Influence of Anonymous Social Behavior of Momo Users**

Active invisibility is Internet users' right, but protecting privacy does not mean absolute freedom. The expression of discourse should pay attention to the boundaries, and momo's identity, which is originally for protecting privacy, should not become a hotbed of Internet violence. As an anonymous social practice initiated by netizens, this phenomenon reflects on the one hand that netizens hope to get more discourse space by separating from their real identities; On the other hand, due to the characteristics of active anonymity and the sense of protection from group behavior, the sense of moral bondage of individuals is weakened, which will easily cause discourse conflicts and extreme emotions, threatening network security.

##### **4.1. Lack of Individual Rational Expression under the Action of Collective Psychological Field**

Under anonymity, netizens can assume any identity. With the "coat" of momo, users have the courage to express their most authentic feelings on social media, and are willing to find friends with similar interests to actively interact with them, and gain a sense of identity and belonging in the process. "I am a fan of Danmei novels in the past (novels about gay men), because I am afraid of not being understood, so I dare not speak out." After I became momo, I dared to speak out and made many new friends." (Respondent B07)

Everything has two sides, the German scholar Fromm once mentioned in *Escape from freedom*, after individuals join the group anonymously, they can escape responsibility and obtain safety, easy to show an abusive and indulgent attitude, and eventually can induce group violence [8]. Momo and other unified vests have the function of covering real identity and dispersed responsibility, and people will be more direct in emotional vent and discourse expression, and many momo show the situation of imitation. "I do not know when there will be a lot of people with the same profile picture and nickname in the comments section of the Xiaohongshu, and many times I want to join, but the content of their comments is not what I originally thought, I believe that there must be blind followers." (Respondent A03) When netizens use momo identity to release their emotions freely, the pressure of personal expression is reduced, especially in some discussions about public issues, the hidden dangers of bad speech, privacy disclosure, spreading rumors, and Internet violence frequently appear, and the quality of discussion is reduced. At the same time, group anonymity may give a natural high fault tolerance, when users make bad remarks, users can escape corresponding responsibilities, but the group impression will be damaged.

##### **4.2. Homogenized Identities Leading to Discourse Shift**

The internet is not a lawless realm. While "momo" users' avatars and nicknames may appear identical, in reality, each user's identity ID is unique. Consequently, platforms can still pinpoint specific individual information. However, the completeness of users' profiles reduced, and the difficulty of regulation significantly increases. For algorithm technology, gathering users' browsing information is a crucial aspect of operation. Yet, in the case of popularity of anonymous social interactions, these technologies are facing new challenges. Moreover, homogenized anonymous identities may lead to the misdirection of group discussions. For instance, when netizens hold conflicting opinions, they may dig up each other's past notes, likes, comments, etc., to refute and support their viewpoints. The emergence of "momo" make the phenomenon of shifting discourse focus more evidently. Due to the lack of historical information, netizens may pay more attention to users' IP information, leading a debate on a certain topic to devolve into regional attacks [9]. "One of the things that makes people angry is that many people can only see where momo's IP address is, which was originally based on the case, but later some of the rhetoric will involve discrimination against the other party's region, which is very unfriendly." (Respondent B10)

##### **4.3. Algorithm Fatigue Presents Challenges to Technology**

Algorithm fatigue describes a phenomenon, that is, users have a feeling of exhaustion under the influence of algorithm technology, and a resistance behavior to escape the algorithm and uninstall the

software. The emergence of momo is users' feedback and domestication of negative issues such as privacy disclosure, unnecessary social interaction and cognitive narrowing under algorithm technology [10]. "I do not want to expose too much personal information online. I do not want others to know about my likes and interactions. These contents in my social circle are exposed to others' views, and I hope my social interactions can be simpler." (Respondent A04) The algorithm products in the future should abandon addition thinking, establish subtraction thinking, consider the rationality and necessity of certain functions from the perspective of user psychology and long-term impact, reduce unnecessary connections, and add indicators such as user satisfaction and content influence to the algorithm model.

## 5. Conclusion

Once upon a time, everyone wanted to be unique, and nicknames and avatars were crucial elements for showcasing personality. However, nowadays, people come to seek coherence in an increasingly transparent online environment. On one hand, individuals desire self-concealment on the internet. Due to the pervasive feeling of privacy invasion and anxiety stemming from social interactions with acquaintances, they resort to protecting their privacy and adopting cloned identities. On the other hand, while concealing themselves, people also pursue a degree of self-disclosure. They no longer use identical avatars and nicknames but add personalized labels to their Momo identities, seeking individuality within commonality. However, the anonymous socializing facilitated by Momo identities also poses numerous crises to the online environment. The influence of collective psychological fields compromises individual rational expression, while homogenized identities lead to a shift in discourse focus. Additionally, algorithm fatigue challenges technology, increasing users' cognitive burden. Achieving self-protection in the digital society necessitates platforms taking responsibility for enhancing content publishing, personal information management, and innovation. They should improve privacy protection measures and provide diverse social functions to alleviate users' concerns and meet their needs fundamentally. While this study provides insights into understanding users' behavior on anonymous social platforms, further research is warranted to explore this field due to objective limitations such as sample constraints.

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