

Digital Visibility and Symbolic Capital Accumulation in Social Media—An Analysis Based on Capital Theory and Self-Presentation Theory

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Abstract: Metrics of interaction on social media can be used to quantify the spread of information, and this spread will affect how influential a person is. Based on the concept of capital theory by Bourdieu and the idea of self-presentation theory by Goffman, this paper believes that visibility is the result of platform algorithm allocation and user strategic presentation; thus, continuous attention can be transformed into symbolic capital and generate monetary profit. Competition for attention may lead to problems of anxiety about being forgotten and digital division, so both need to be addressed by means of algorithmic governance and media literacy, etc. This paper has extended the range of explanation for the old school theory in the digital age to some extent and put forward a new view of digital social stratification.

Keywords: Digital Visibility, Symbolic Capital, Self-Presentation, Social Media, Algorithm Governance

1. Introduction

With the development of digital technology, quantitative indicators such as likes and shares on social media have led to the quantification of social attention, and "visibility" has become an important social resource and a new type of symbolic capital. Bourdieu's theory of capital and Goffman's theory of self-presentation will be used to study the following three problems in this paper: Is digital visibility a new form of symbolic capital? How do Platform Algorithms Affect the Production of Visibility? How do people want to be noticed through the strategy of self-presentation? Extend the digital explanatory power of the classical sociological theory to the level of theory in this paper to reveal the structural stratification of digital platforms and offer some reference material for understanding governance issues such as attention anxiety and algorithmic power at the practical level.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Evolution of Visibility Theory

The idea of "visibility" was first formally proposed and then studied in the research on power and media. The French thinker Foucault studied the disciplinary society and put forward the model of the "panopticon"; he also pointed out that power can continuously observe people's behaviour through the structure of visibility^[5]. John B. Gibbs, the first. Thompson put forward the idea of "mediated visibility" and believed that mass media had altered the structure of visibility in traditional society, thus increasing the visibility of social actors to the public^[6]. Andrea Brighenti, an Italian sociologist, has defined visibility as a system of social relations and believes that there is an asymmetry between "being seen" and having the power to see^[4]. The first studies have established the foundation for the theory of visibility based on power and medium structure.

2.2 Digital Visibility in the Social Media Environment

With the development of social media, one of the main places for public discussion has been the Internet. Li Jing thinks that the platform has created new kinds of interaction, such as likes and comments, and has made people's social relationships and identities more visible; thus, they have increased their participation in the "visualisation" of social capital^[10]. Lyu Jing has been studying the

social media behaviour of young people and has found that liking is not only a way to communicate with others but also a way for users to form a sense of self and present themselves to the world^[11]. Jiang Hong and Long Xiaoxu studied WeChat Exercise and found that the platform can continuously present people's daily lives as data records in the form of social networks, and users have the option to show this information or not^[8].

2.3 Algorithmic Mechanism and Visibility Allocation

With the spread of recommendation algorithms, scholars have begun to study the generation mechanism of visibility at the level of platform structure. Zhou Baohua believes that in the era of information overload, for a problem to be discussed by the public, it first needs to attract the attention of the public; thus, the formation of public opinion is essentially the distribution of attention and visibility^[7]. According to the behaviour and social relations of users, the algorithm system will determine how far and how quickly the information spreads; thus, it will change the path of public issue diffusion and gradually change the mode of dissemination for public opinion from "editorial selection" to "algorithmic allocation"^[7].

2.4 Research Review and Limitations

Research on the generation logic of digital visibility has been carried out from the perspectives of theory, media practice and platform mechanisms, but most of these studies have focused on expressive behaviour and interactive features and have paid less attention to how digital visibility is used to build social resources in social relationship networks. Systematic research on the connection between visibility and social stratification from the perspective of social capital or symbolic capital is still relatively rare, and the lack of such studies will be discussed in more detail in this paper.

3. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Model

3.1 The Concept of Digital Visibility

Visibility on social media usually refers to how many people have seen, liked or followed a particular post or account. Visibility on the Internet is relatively easy to measure compared with traditional social participation. The number of likes, shares, comments and other likes from others, as well as the number of followers, are all signs of how popular a person's posts are on the platform. The above indicators show that the information has been spread and a new system of social participation has also been formed. Some users have been using the platform more often, so the algorithm will be more likely to recommend their content and promote the spread of that content. Now there is a "visibility cycle"; that is, high visibility attracts more attention to a particular thing, and thus that thing becomes even more visible.

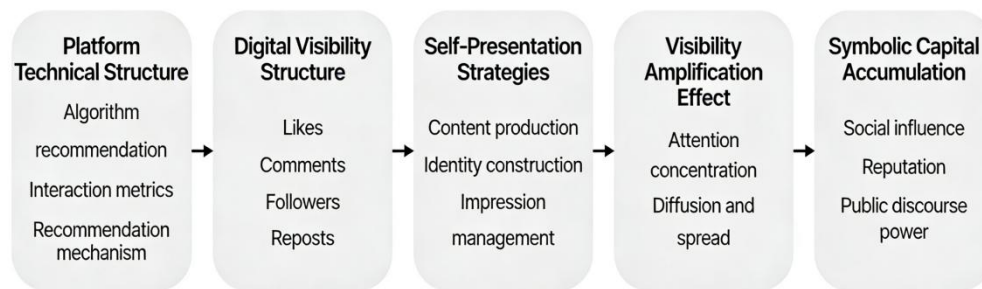
3.2 Digital Visibility and the Transformation of Symbolic Capital

According to the theory of capital, symbols are generally associated with social recognition and prestige. As an index of interaction on digital platforms, it has been used to measure social influence and has gradually begun to accumulate symbolic capital. The number of likes and the size of the follower base are no longer just technical indicators but have gradually become important bases for social evaluation. The above process can be regarded as a kind of capital transfer. Some people have gained some attention by creating content and interacting with others, and as this attention has grown, it has gradually achieved social recognition and online influence. With the spread of popular culture, some people have started to turn the symbol of culture into real-money assets by cooperating with advertisers or monetising the content.

3.3 A Model of the Capitalisation Mechanism for Digital Visibility

Based on the above analysis, this paper puts forward a four-link model of the capitalisation mechanism for digital visibility and accumulation of symbolic capital. First, there is the structure of the platform; algorithms and modes of interaction on the platform form an institution that sets general rules for the spread of information. The second is digital visibility, and the specific forms of visibility are indicators such as likes, comments and the number of followers. The third is the strategy of

self-promotion; that is to say, in order to attract more attention on the platform, one can create content and build a brand. The fourth is the accumulation of symbolic capital; as it spreads further, it gains more social recognition and online influence and thus creates new symbolic capital. At any time, the technology of the platform and the behaviour of the people will together form a new kind of digital social division.



4. Generation Mechanism of Digital Visibility

4.1 Platform Algorithms and Visibility Allocation

Now, algorithmic recommendations are the main way information spreads on social media, not active searching. Based on how users behave, the platform will organise the content according to clicks and likes. As users can only see a small part of the information feed, the platform will be the main distribution channel for digital goods and determine how visible the content is. The spread range of a piece of content is generally determined by how often it is liked; that is to say, content that receives likes more frequently will be promoted by algorithms, and content with a low interaction rate will be lost in a large number of information. Therefore, most of the distribution of visibility will be concentrated in a few places. At the same time, the users will adjust their production plans according to the recommendations of the algorithm and increase the number of views. From the above, we can see that platform algorithms have affected both the spread of popularity and the formation of content ecology and culture on the platform.

4.2 Self-Presentation Strategies and Visibility Competition

With the decrease in visibility now, many people have begun to use all sorts of ways to increase their exposure, and this behaviour is in line with the contents of Goffman's theory of self-presentation. Create entertaining and moving content that is in line with the cultural norms of the platform and meets the wishes of its users; communicate with the audience regularly, design attractive visual elements for images and videos, build an online brand, and move people's hearts by sharing personal experiences and stories. With more competition for people's attention, some people have begun to organise regular, organised activities and data analysis to spread their ideas more effectively. The general plan of life gives a direction for one's daily life.

4.3 Visibility Cycle and Symbolic Capital Accumulation

After gaining popularity on the platform, some users have reached a certain level of influence and entered a three-stage "visibility cycle". The first is initial accumulation; that is to say, users are drawn in by the content that has been posted, and then the algorithm will spread this popular content to attract more users. Second, there will be the spread of influence; after a long time of high visibility, the account will gain authority and attract more dedicated fans. The third is the accumulation of symbolic capital; with great care, one can achieve social recognition and become an opinion leader to earn

money from it. Therefore, digital visibility is the result of the interaction between algorithms and people's behaviour, and thus, visibility has gradually become symbolic capital and formed a new system of social stratification in the digital age.

5. Social Risks of Digital Visibility Competition

5.1 Digital Visibility Competition and Attention Anxiety

Likes, comments and follower numbers are general indicators of social media participation that people use to show their online presence, and they can affect a person's sense of self-worth to some extent. If one pays too much attention to the data, people will feel watched and thus become more anxious about creating content. If the data do not meet the people's expectations, they will be left feeling disappointed. Users have been adding more and more content continuously in an attempt to attract some attention. When others are the focus of attention, some people feel anxious because they are not being recognised. Therefore, some users will be more likely to post emotional or controversial content to gain attention from others. Although such content will gain some attention in the short run, it will also increase the negative emotions of the online community. Based on the above, we can see that visibility competition has affected people's psychology and shaped the environment of online culture.

5.2 Algorithmic Allocation Mechanism and Digital Inequality

Algorithms are used in the society of platforms to distribute information according to the behaviour of some users. Although it is more convenient, this way will exacerbate the problem of digital division. Algorithms tend to favour content that has already received many likes and comments; therefore, it is easier for these popular works to be recommended again and again by users, and new or less popular content struggles to gain attention and does not receive much exposure, thus creating a "rich get richer" situation. Lack of publicity has also led to a difference in discursive power; those who are in the public eye have more influence, and groups that do not attract attention are easily forgotten, thereby intensifying the platform stratification of opinion leaders, ordinary consumers and content creators. Therefore, it can be seen that the technological structure of the platform has greatly reduced digital visibility, and inequality has become a serious problem in digital society.

5.3 Platform Power Structure and the Concentration of Public Opinion Influence

With the rise of social media as the main way for people to communicate, the structure of visibility on these platforms directly affects public opinion, and the power of dissemination is gradually being concentrated in the hands of platforms and top users. Algorithms regulate how much public attention is given to something and can thus spread some topics while suppressing others. High-visibility opinion leaders lead the direction of public opinion; although they can spread information, they also reduce the diversity of public discussion and fail to address all problems. The technical design of platforms directly affects the environment for public opinion, and one of the problems that need to be solved now is how to maintain the diversity of the information ecology while improving the efficiency of dissemination. Although the aim of the Digital Visibility Competition is to promote social participation, there are also problems such as individual anxiety, digital inequality and the concentration of public opinion; thus, changes need to be made in the institutional design and platform governance to address these problems.

6. Governance Paths and Optimisation Strategies for Digital Visibility Competition

6.1 Optimisation of Platform Algorithm Governance and the Visibility Allocation Mechanism

Algorithmic recommendation will cover most of the distribution of information in the society of platforms and thus determine how visible that information is. Improve Governance of Algorithms to Reduce the Problem of Algorithmic Opacity. Raise the level of algorithm transparency to some extent and reduce the public's unease about the rules. Second, all sorts of recommendation strategies can be used by the platforms to help new users and low-exposure content get started, avoid the "rich get richer" spread effect, and maintain the diversity of the content ecology. The foundation of the platform should not be a single index of interaction; by considering both the quality and depth of the content, we can reduce the people's demand for emotional stimulation. Strengthen the governance and distribution

algorithms to promote the spread of information on the platform and solve the problem of structural inequality.

6.2 Enhance Users' Digital Media Literacy and Rational Expression

As spreaders of information and participants in the ecological life of digital platforms, users should be digitally literate and avoid harm caused by the competition for attention. First, help people be more reasonable in their thinking; they need to know that their performance indicators do not reflect their actual worth, so they will feel less pressure and have better mental health. Second, users need to improve the expression of information and avoid using too many or overly emotional words merely for the sake of spreading; thus, the quality of public discussion will be improved. Thirdly, people should be more aware of the social impact of what they post and how far it can spread. With the improvement of the literacy mentioned above, users will be able to participate in the visibility competition more reasonably and effectively reduce the social pressure of the attention economy.

6.3 Building an All-Weather Public Communication Environment

The building of an all-weather public communication environment can help to solve the problem of digital invisibility. Platforms should encourage all kinds of good content creation by users so that problems in various places and at different times can be shared, and no single type of content will be in the spotlight. At the same time, learning from the expressions of all groups can also promote the all-round participation of the public in the discussion. Cooperate with social organizations to spread scientific and rational knowledge on the platform and reduce the proportion of entertainment. Algorithm optimisation, the promotion of media literacy and the creation of a good-weather environment can all help reduce some social risks of visibility competition and promote the healthy development of the platform ecosystem.

7. Conclusion

Likes and followers on social media are now forms of quantifiable social attention, and digital visibility has become one of the reasons for a person's influence and recognition in society. Based on the capital theory and the theory of self-presentation, the following theoretical hypothesis is put forward in this paper: Digital visibility is the outcome of interaction between users and algorithms, algorithms distribute attention through information ranking, and users compete by creating content. As a result of the accumulation of attention to a certain extent, it has become popular and gained social prestige; symbolically, it has now taken the form of symbolic capital and is also showing some potential for conversion into economic capital. There are also some problems in some areas regarding the competition for attention, such as anxiety about being noticed, an increase in structural inequality, and a decrease in diversity in public discussion. Therefore, we need to strengthen the regulation of algorithms and promote the cultivation of media literacy among the public. This paper has three theoretical contributions. First, the capital theory has been used to study digital platforms and is now being extended in scope. Second, given the structure of the platform, we can talk about how to create awareness. Thirdly, it puts forward a "model of the capitalisation mechanism for digital visibility and accumulation of symbolic capital" and builds an analytical system to classify digital platforms. In the future, we will collect more empirical data, conduct cross-platform comparisons, give more weight to the effect of artificial intelligence on algorithmic power, and thus enhance our understanding of the social consequences of digital visibility.

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