

From Audience to Producer: Identity Performance and Media Engagement of Chinese Vloggers on Red Book

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dual identities of Chinese international student vloggers on the Red Book platform, exploring their roles as both content producers and audiences through the theoretical lenses of Abercrombie and Longhurst's spectacle/performance paradigm and Goffman's self-presentation theory. Based on semi-structured interviews with five independent vloggers documenting their overseas daily lives, the research identifies three sequential phases of identity performance: pre-vlogging, where participants engage as diffused audiences motivated by information-seeking and emotional immersion in aestheticized vlog content; vlogging, where they adopt frontstage self-presentation through selective editing and backstage suppression of negative experiences, embodying Goffman's dramaturgical model; and post-vlogging, where their engagement shifts to critical viewing, prioritizing skill learning and cultural comparison. Findings reveal a paradox between the pursuit of authentic life documentation and performative spectacle, highlighting how vloggers negotiate identity through dynamic media engagement. The study concludes by emphasizing the cyclical interplay of spectacle, self-representation, and cultural imagination in shaping vloggers' dual roles, advocating for future research to integrate digital mediation theories.

KEYWORDS

Chinese international students; Vloggers; Red Book; Spectacle-performance paradigm; Self-presentation; Media engagement

1 Introduction: vlogging as a nexus of identity negotiation in platformized societies

The video blog ("vlog") has gained popularity via the internet and technological advances^[1]. Born on YouTube in 2012 as a video diary of daily life, vlogging arrived in China in 2016, initially led by international students influenced by overseas culture who adapted foreign creation methods. With more Chinese students studying abroad and media tech advancements, growing numbers now share "who they are and how they live" via vlogs on social platforms^[2].

Founded in 2013, Red Book is an online community where users share lifestyles through short videos/photos. Its 2022 report shows over 200 million monthly active users, 72% born post-1990^[3]. This young, lifestyle-focused user base makes it a key self-expression platform. Red Book's vlogs, mostly under three minutes, suit fragmented viewing. Its slogan "Tagging my life" aligns with vlogging's authentic life-recording purpose, attracting many young creators.

Current vlogger research in China and the West mainly focuses on producers or fans in isolation, lacking exploration of vloggers' dual roles as both creators and audiences. Addressing this gap, this essay samples Chinese international student vloggers on Red Book to explore: How do they perform identities as vloggers? How do they engage with others as viewers? As Stuart Hall noted, identities are "never singular but multiply constructed" across intersecting discourses^[4].

2 Methodology: A qualitative inquiry into spectacle, performance, and media engagement

This essay employs Abercrombie and Longhurst's spectacle/performance paradigm as its theoretical framework^[5]. Emerging in the 1990s amid rapid internet growth, this paradigm emerged as media information flooded daily life, shaping a "mediascape society"^[5]. It shifts audience research from textual analysis to mediascape dynamics, offering a robust framework. Additionally, Goffman's self-presentation concept analyzes vloggers' producer identities^[6], while Annette Hill's engagement parameters—focusing on context, motivations, and modalities—explore their role as audiences^[7], prioritizing parameters most relevant to this study.

A semi-structured qualitative interview method examines vloggers' attitudes. Open-ended questions, as Seals notes, elicit deep insights into respondents' perspectives^[8]. Five interviews were conducted, including one pilot, targeting Chinese international students (≥18, any gender) with ≥20 Red Book vlogs, ≥3,000 followers, independent production, and daily-life content. Sampling focused on those engaging with similar vloggers. Recruitments spanned students from Sweden, Korea, the UK, Germany, and Singapore, via Red Book. 30–40-minute phone interviews included consent forms for privacy, with data audio-recorded and transcribed.

Thematic coding analyzed transcribed data^[8]. Open coding used color-coding for descriptive info; repetitive codes were grouped into preliminary categories in Google Sheets. Spider diagrams identified coding-concept relationships, forming categories through constant comparison—the second coding stage. Drawing on theoretical paradigms, three themes emerged: spectacle, self-presentation/performance, and media engagement. A codebook structured themes,

categories, and subcategories. Ultimately, deductive/inductive coding distilled these themes, guiding exploration of identity shifts and thematic connections across vloggers' evolving roles.

3 Findings: the cyclical dynamics of audience-producer identity transitions

3.1 Pre-vlogging phase: diffused audiences and the aestheticization of spectacle

The rapid development of internet and media technology has immersed us in a "media-saturated" society, where media convergence continually reshapes a complex media ecology^[5]. Against this backdrop, Abercrombie and Longhurst conceptualized audiences into three types: simple, mass, and diffused. The "diffuse audience" refers to individuals exposed to media content indirectly—not through direct consumption, but via social interactions or ambient media exposure. This aptly describes many vlog viewers, who often start watching after being influenced by surrounding media environments. As interviewees recalled:

"In the beginning, it was because I like to watch Bilibili and the homepage would recommend some vlogs..." (Interviewee 1)

"On Mei Pai, celebrities shared travel videos in vlog form, though we didn't call it 'vlog' then." (Interviewee 3)

This diffuse audience highlights how media saturation normalizes vlog consumption, with people absorbing vlog-related content through diverse channels, not just direct viewing.

The scholars' second concept, "spectacle," describes a society where people, objects, and events exist to be watched^[5]. Mass media has transformed the world into a "mediascape," where vlogs serve as everyday life spectacles, satisfying audiences' craving for visual narratives. Yet spectacle is more than passive viewing; it involves conscious or unconscious engagement with media content.

Engagement, rooted in affect and identity, can be analyzed via parameters like context, motivations, and modalities^[7]. For the interviewees—all Chinese international students who began vlogging post-abroad—their pre-vlogging engagement with other student vlogs was often driven by informational needs. As Interviewee 2 explained when researching life in Korea:

"I wanted to see real daily life—what students ate, if they only had kimchi—instead of agency propaganda."

This motivation for authentic information was paired with a "yearning" modality, fostering a "social imaginary"—how people envision their social existence^[10]. By immersing in others' vlogs, they preimagined their own overseas lives:

"I followed vloggers to imagine my future life, feeling immersed in theirs." (Interviewee 2)

The spectacle process also ties to the aestheticization of everyday life, driven by media's proliferation of images^[5]. Vlogs, which aesthetically document daily experiences, blend life and art. Viewers are emotionally engaged by curated visuals, editing, and soundtracks:

"His editing, filters, BGM—everything makes ordinary moments feel brilliant and creative." (Interviewee 4)

Such positive affect can lead to "embedded engagement," where viewing becomes a long-term habit. Interviewee 4 followed a vlogger across life stages—studying, working, returning to China—across multiple platforms, demonstrating deep, sustained involvement.

In this pre-vlogging phase, these students acted as diffused audiences, initially drawn by informational needs. Vlogs, as aestheticized image products, enabled them to engage emotionally, blending practical utility with imaginative yearning. This engagement not only shaped their media habits but also prefigured their later roles as vloggers, as they internalized the spectacle and self-presentation norms they had observed. The interplay of diffuse audience dynamics, spectacle consumption, and affective engagement thus lays the groundwork for understanding how they later performed their own identities through vlogging.

3.2 Vlogging as performative practice: frontstage self-presentation and backstage impression management

A key distinction of diffused audiences is the blurred boundary between performers and viewers—unlike simple or mass audiences, where a clear distance exists, diffused audiences both consume and perform^[5]. Vlog viewing often inspires imitation, transforming audiences into creators. As Aimedia's survey shows, 76.8% of audiences are willing to share lives via vlogs, illustrating how producer-audience role shifts foster community building^[11].

"Just the vlogger I just mentioned, I thought her life was very interesting. So I was determined that when I go to Korea I'm going to make this kind of vlog, and I'm going to document what I eat in a day, as well as record some of the conversations I have with my friends." (Interviewee 2)

Watching vlog provides a resource for the audiences to imitate as well as perform. The interviewees shift from audience to producer, from viewer to vlogger. For vloggers, making a vlog to record and share their daily lives is a form of self-presentation and self-expression, which is a performance of personal style and aesthetic taste. This corresponds to

Goffman's argument that "society is a big stage and life is like a theatre" in his dramaturgical theory^[6]. It can be said that the vlog is the stage of vloggers, and the production process of vlog is basically the practice and interpretation of Goffman's dramaturgical theory.

As the key place for performance, Goffman divides the stage area into two parts, front and backstage. The front is the area where the audience can watch the performance, and Goffman divides the specific functions and roles of the front area more closely into the setting and personal front^[6]. In the past, the stage was often fixed and full of stability, and Goffman argues that the movement of the stage was usually seen in ceremonies such as funerals, processions, and the coronation of kings. However, mobile technology has created a 'virtual setting' that disrupts the traditional model of human interaction and transforms the setting. Thus vlog become the window for the audience to experience a variety of settings. Vlog maximize the variety of settings and thus create a distinctive front stage.

"Most of my vlogs are just showing 'my day', like waking up in the morning and making breakfast, then going to the gym, then going to school, and finally coming home and making dinner." (Interviewee 5)

Under the slogan "Tagging my life", the topic of "vlog my day" has already reached 1.6 billion views on Red Book. In the daily life vlogs produced by Chinese international students, the settings are mostly at home, supermarkets, schools, and tourist spots. The diversity of settings shaped by the camera is mobile, breaking the monotony of a single setting. In addition, the vloggers sometimes change the setting frequently in order to give the best stage presentation.

"Sometimes I just want to stay home and relax, but then I suddenly think I have some more footage to enrich my vlog content, so then I choose to hang out or eat some delicious food." (Interviewee 5)

In addition, Goffman divides expression into conscious *give* and unconscious *give off*. *Give off* refers to unconscious or uncontrolled expressions of emotion, information, etc^[6]. The Internet age has made it easier to connect with everything, but this connection is fragile, and human interaction is in the form of a "person - medium - person" situation^[2]. As the vlogger and the audiences are no longer in direct contact, unconscious *give off* under the control of the camera is replaced by conscious *give*. In addition, by planning scripts or post-editing, the vlogger's personal expressions, such as "words and manners", become increasingly invisible, while the vlogger reinforces what he or she wants to present.

"I will only share the happier things that I encounter in my life." (Interviewee 1)

"I like to share positive things, more realistic and objective and interesting and funny things." (Interviewee 2)

This echoes Guy Debord's statement that "what appears is good, what is good appears"^[12]. Conscious performance and selective presentation through "stage tools" such as cameras, tripods and editing software is the performance technique of internet performers which goes without saying. The vlog, as a series of edits, embellished and re-pieced is a vehicle for the vlogger's impression management. In contrast, some areas are clearly highlighted and others are suppressed^[6]. That is the backstage hidden from vloggers.

"There are moments in my life when I get very down and negative, but I wouldn't post anything like that because I think it puts people in a bad mood if I post something like that, and maybe people don't like to watch it." (Interviewee 1)

In interviews, vloggers often conjecture audience preferences—"People might not be interested," "They might find it boring"—revealing a dynamic where self-presentation hinges on imagining an audience. Abercrombie and Longhurst term this "narcissism and imagination": vloggers perform for an imagined crowd, using audience feedback (real or imaginary) to curate content that reflects both their desired image and perceived viewer interests^[5]. What appears in vlogs is selectively edited—moments they deem shareable or engaging—an "imagined mirror" for impression management.

Goffman's "idealized performance" posits that individuals present curated personas to gain social approval^[6]. Yet in daily vlogs, authenticity reigns. Unlike highly stylized short videos, vlogs thrive on personal, unpolished content. All interviewees emphasized "authentic self-presentation," with Interviewee 1 stating:

"Full marks. vlogs are taken from my life, so it just says a part of my life, but because it is also edited and selected... I can't present the whole of my life, it's a part of my life, it's consistent and real, but it's just not the whole of me." (Interviewee 1)

Contradictions emerged, however. Interviewee 3 admitted reenacting moments with friends for footage:

"There were times when I was having fun with my friends and forgot to shoot, and would ask them to raise their glasses again to make up the image... It affects the experience of having fun with your friends and yourself." (Interviewee 3)

This highlights a core tension: vlogging as documentation vs. performance. Vloggers balance diary-like normalcy with audience appeal, resulting in "embellished authenticity"—subjective, artistic representations rather than unfiltered reality.

At the end of this part, let's go back to the first question of the interview: "What was your initial motivation for vlogging?"

"The initial idea was that I wanted to document the life of studying abroad, which I think was a very wonderful time in my life. But if I record it in pictures, I don't think it's that vivid. If I record it on video, I feel that even when I am in my 50s or 60s and I look back at the vlog, I will feel like I was there, and I will be able to evoke the memories of that time."

(Interviewee 2)

This aligns with Harold Lasswell's view of media as transmitters of social heritage^[12]. Vlogs' visual richness offers irreplaceable documentation, blending personal memory with broader cultural archiving.

For non-commercial student vloggers, the act of recording becomes introspective. By curating their lives, they engage in self-discovery, blurring the line between creator and audience. As they edit and reflect, they become their own primary viewers, consuming their experiences through a crafted lens. This dual role—performer and spectator—highlights how vlogging serves not just as public sharing but as a tool for self-understanding, embedding personal narratives within a broader mediascape of authenticity and imagination.

3.3 Post-vlogging engagement: shifting motivations and critical media consumption

Media engagement is a dynamic relational process^[9]. As participants' identities have shifted from diffused audience to vlogger to viewer now, their engagement with international student vloggers has also developed a dynamic change based on contextual changes and media practices. Firstly, there was a difference in the motivation for engaging in this style of vlog. Before participants started living overseas, they engaged for authentic information, as mentioned in the first part. However, after a period of living locally, the demand for authentic information diminished, and instead, they engaged with local apps to access more direct sources. However, based on the media practice of vlogging and the identity of the vlogger, they still engage in other international students' vlogs in order to learn the skills and better presentation.

"I'm actually watching the vlogs now for two purposes, one is to relax and the other is to learn their shooting and cutting skills. To see the content and themes presented by other international students and learn how to present my vlogs better." (Interviewee 5)

However, as living contexts have changed, the media context for the participants has not actually varied much, their main platform for media engagement is still from China. As Dahlgren and Hill say, motivation is also related to socialities, which provide information about the ways in which we participate in a variety of communities, groups, and networks. Such as recommendations from friends, or a sense of belonging in a community^[9].

"First of all it's a Chinese platform and I can read everyone's comments. And also because of a sense of familiarity, there are also my friends and vloggers on there who I've followed for a long time." (Interviewee 1)

After a period of living locally, and based on their own experiences of life, participants had more critical thinking about the content conveyed in other international student vlogs. Here there are two modalities of positive and negative cognitive engagement.

"I don't pay as much interest in these vloggers after coming to Korea because I have my own ideas now and I know a lot about Korea on my side. It's not like before, it's all unknown. Watching their vlogs before coming to Korea was more of an input of information, just feeling and accepting those things they pass on, whatever they say. Then after I came to Korea, it was more about having that sense of recognition and agreeing with what they were saying or not agreeing with what they were saying." (Interviewee 2)

Media engagement is a powerful subjective experience and emotional experience that relates to the subjectivity of the self, both individual and collective^[7]. Thus, Dahlgren and Hill perceive engagement as having a spectrum quality, with affective and cognitive modalities that switch between positive and negative engagement to disengagement. In addition to the positive affective modalities of engagement analyzed in the first part, one participant also expressed negative feelings towards some of the international student vlogs based on her own life and therefore chose not to engage with them.

"I feel like why is my study abroad life all about reading literature and writing papers and why do they can travel around... I get so frustrated watching these kinds of vlogs... And the kind of international students who wake up at 5 am to study, it makes me feel very stressed... I also don't like international student vlogs that like to show off their wealth... That's why I don't watch these vlogs anymore" (Interviewee 1)

4 Conclusion

The research takes Chinese international student vloggers on Red Book as the sampling to explore the multiple identities of vloggers as producers and audiences. The spectacle/performance paradigm proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst is used as a theoretical framework, combined with Goffman's self-presentation concept and Dahlgren and Hill's parameters of media engagement as a tool to analyze the identities and media engagement of Chinese international student vloggers. This study used semi-structured qualitative interviews and thematic coding to distill the three themes of this study: spectacle, self-presentation and performance, and media engagement. This essay followed the chronological order of the vlogger's changing identity to explore the connections and changes between these three themes and these three periods.

In conclusion, in a society where media images are proliferating, people become a diffused audience of vlog through the media penetration of everyday life. The process of spectating vlogs provides the resources for audiences to imitate

and perform, and vloggers shift from audience to producer, presenting and performing themselves through vlogging. The vlog, as a series of edits, embellished and re-pieced is a vehicle for the vlogger's impression management: emphasizing the positive in the frontstage and hiding the negative in the backstage. Trying to present a part of the "authentic" self, performing for the real or imaginary audience. They perceive themselves as performers being spectated by others while at the same time spectating the performance of others, simultaneously being both spectators and performers, achieving a cycle of 'spectacle and performance'.

As participants' identities have shifted from diffused audience to vlogger to viewer now, their engagement with international student vloggers is a dynamic relational process based on contextual changes and media practices. The motivation for engagement shifted from "access information" to "learn skills", and the yearning and imagination for international student vlogs diminished, with more positive or negative cognitive modalities of engagement, based on their own local life. At the same time, there were also participants who had negative feelings about the fancy life shown in the international student vlogs and chose not to engage with it.

Goffman proposed the dramaturgical theory in the 1950s while the Internet was born around the end of the 1960s, and Goffman could not foresee the media explosion on the Internet in the 21st century. Thus, with the immersion and importance of digital media in our daily lives, Joshua Meyrowitz introduced the medium as a variable that could transcend physical territory into dramaturgical theory, based on the concept of 'frontstage' and 'backstage', proposing the 'middle region'^[13]. Therefore, in future research, Joshua Meyrowitz's concept could be added to go deeper into the analysis of Vlogger's recording, role presentation, and hiding in the vlogging process.

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