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Performing the Workplace: Self-Presentation of Workplace Vloggers from the Perspective of Dramaturgical Theory

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Abstract

A The rise of workplace vlogs signifies a new form of digital performance, wherein creators transform their professional environments and labor processes into continuously watchable media content. Beneath the surface of "documenting work," a systematic construction of self-image takes place. This study employs Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory as its core analytical framework, integrating theoretical resources such as the "multi-stage front stage," "visibility production," and "connection and anti-connection" to examine the operational mechanisms and structural dilemmas of self-presentation among workplace vloggers. The research reveals that the core strategy of workplace vloggers is "mid-stage performance"—selectively exposing backstage elements to manufacture a sense of authenticity, thereby turning "authenticity" itself into a consumable front-stage symbol. However, this strategy contains an inherent paradox: the continuous extension of the front stage systematically compresses the backstage space, transforming audience gaze from "external viewing" to "internal surveillance." Bloggers, caught between multiple role expectations, fall into role overload and authenticity deficits. To cope with these pressures, they develop counter-strategies such as group visibility controls, content deletion, and periodic disconnection to maintain performance boundaries. This paper argues that the self-presentation in workplace vlogs epitomizes the deep entanglement of labor, performance, and identity in the digital age, reflecting the structural roots of self-alienation within platformized societies.

Keywords

Dramaturgical Theory; Workplace Vlog; Self-Presentation; Mid-Stage Performance; Anti-Connection

1. Introduction

In recent years, workplace vlogs tagged with labels such as "9-to-5 life," "big-tech diary," or "law firm internship" have surged in popularity on short-video platforms, becoming a highly consumed content genre among young audiences. Bloggers

document their entire workday—commuting, meetings, overtime, lunch breaks, and even workplace social interactions—transforming experiences traditionally considered private within the professional sphere into public media performances. On the surface, this appears to be a simple form of life documentation. Upon closer examination, however, it touches upon a fundamental transformation in self-presentation in the digital age: when "work" itself is organized as continuously watchable content, the traditional spatial structure of performance undergoes a profound displacement.

The distinctiveness of workplace vlogs lies in their "dual front stage" nature. On one hand, bloggers are situated within real professional environments and must adhere to established role expectations and performance standards. On the other hand, the camera converts this very environment into a performance stage on social media, requiring bloggers to comply with the platform's logic of visibility and audience expectations. These two front-stage demands are not always aligned, and the tension between them constitutes the central dilemma of self-presentation for workplace vloggers.

This paper utilizes Goffman's dramaturgical theory as its foundation, integrating insights from Su and Liang's (2026) "multi-stage continuous performance system," Li and Li's (2026) discussion of "visibility production," and Pan and Wang's (2026) analysis of "connection and anti-connection." It seeks to answer the following questions: How do workplace vloggers present themselves at the intersection of their professional and media roles? What strategic logic governs this presentation? What structural dilemmas do they encounter? And how do they cope with these challenges? By exploring these questions, this paper aims to reveal the deeper mechanisms through which self-presentation in the digital age has transformed from a "situational performance" into a "continuous existential burden."

2. Theoretical Framework: The Extension of Dramaturgical Theory in the Digital Age

2.1. Core Propositions of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) proposed that social interaction is essentially a theatrical performance. Individuals engage in "impression management" on the front stage, employing strategies such as idealization, mystification, and remedial tactics to control audience perceptions according to social norms and role expectations. On the back stage, they shed their role masks and revert to a relatively authentic self. The boundary between the front and back stages is crucial for the sustainability of performance—without a reliable back stage, performers lose their space for rest and recovery, rendering the performance itself unsustainable.

However, Goffman's analysis centered on face-to-face, embodied interactions, where the front/back stage boundary is defined by physical space and temporal continuity.

When social interaction migrates to digital platforms, the logic of this boundary formation undergoes a fundamental change.

2.2. Three Dimensions of Extension for Dramaturgical Theory in the Digital Age

hree key extensions of dramaturgical theory are particularly relevant to this analysis.

First, the topological extension of the virtual front stage and the "multi-stage" model. Su and Liang (2026) argue that digital disembedding mechanisms dissolve traditional embodied constraints, allowing individuals to perform across multiple social platforms and accounts simultaneously, forming a "topological network of personalities." They propose a "multi-stage continuous performance system," expanding Goffman's binary structure (front/back stage) into a five-level continuum: the interest front stage (highest instrumental performance intensity), the daily front stage (routine performance under social gaze), the intimate front stage (reduced-intensity performance in close relationships), the family front stage (operation of kinship role scripts), and the private self front stage (a "pseudo-backstage" where internalized social norms still operate even in solitude). This model reveals a critical fact: in the digital age, there is no absolute back stage—all spaces are, to varying degrees, being front-staged.

Second, "visibility production" as a core mechanism of performance. In their study of hitchhiking-to-Tibet streamers, Li and Li (2026) found that platform-era self-presentation is no longer a simple recording of existing life but a process of content production centered on "being seen." The journey, body, emotions, and personal experiences are continuously processed into watchable and empathetic media resources, and the performer's self-image is constantly shaped and solidified through interactive feedback. This perspective shifts analytical focus from "performer intent" to "visibility logic," revealing how platform interactions deeply intervene in the construction of self-image.

Third, the dynamic balance between "connection and anti-connection." Pan and Wang's (2026) research indicates that digital-age users do not simply seek more connections. Instead, they navigate a dynamic balance between the sense of existence and social capital gained through connection and the fatigue induced by connection overload. The coexistence of "pinning" (reinforcing connection) and "visible for three days" (anti-connection) features on WeChat Moments exemplifies users' active capacity to manage performance boundaries. This framework is invaluable for understanding how workplace vloggers maintain private space amidst continuous exposure.

Synthesizing these theoretical resources, this paper conceptualizes workplace vloggers' self-presentation as a form of "visibility production" unfolding under the compounded pressures of the "multi-stage front stage." The core tension lies between the infinite extension of performance space and the finite nature of

backstage resources.

3. Strategies of Self-Presentation among Workplace Vloggers

3.1. "Mid-Stage Performance": Transforming the Backstage into a Visibility Resource

The core performative strategy of workplace vloggers is not the flawless idealization of the front stage but the selective translation of traditionally backstage scenes into front-stage content to construct "authenticity" as a key symbolic resource.

In Goffman's framework, office interiors, casual work-state moments, and informal interactions with colleagues belong to the backstage domain—scenes that might reveal fatigue, anxiety, or informal relationships and are therefore not usually presented to the "audience" (clients, superiors, or external parties). Workplace vloggers, however, foreground precisely these elements. The clutter of a desk, the exhaustion of the commute, the drowsiness of overtime, and the dejection after a reprimand all become narrative focal points. This "front-staging of the backstage" creates an impression of "what you see is what is real," leading the audience to perceive that "the blogger is not performing, just documenting authentically."

However, this "authenticity" is, in fact, a carefully orchestrated impression management strategy. Bloggers do not expose their backstage indiscriminately—they present tiredness that is "understandable," desks that are "aesthetically valuable," and overtime that "elicits empathy." As Li and Li (2026) demonstrate, once physical states and emotional fluctuations enter the platform's narrative framework, they are organized into engaging and transmissible content. The "reality" presented by workplace vloggers is a curated, edited, and narratively packaged "mediated reality," serving to construct a persona of being "down-to-earth," "unpretentious," and "genuinely sharing."

3.2. Idealized Performance and the Professional Dimension of Impression Management

Concurrent with the "authenticity" strategy is the idealized presentation of professional competence. Workplace vloggers must ultimately prove themselves as competent professionals on camera, otherwise risking accusations of being "unserious" or "posing." Therefore, they strategically showcase professional skills, efficient work states, and traces of career development. For instance, lawyer-vloggers film trial preparations and legal research, while tech workers present project management and team collaboration.

This idealized performance follows a delicate balancing logic: bloggers must demonstrate capability without appearing so flawless as to lose approachability; they must show work progress without divulging company secrets or violating professional ethics. Consequently, idealization in workplace vlogs tends to focus on "process" rather than "outcome"—showing "how hard I work" is safer and more

empathy-inducing than flaunting major achievements. This "process-oriented idealization" essentially shifts the intensity of professional performance from "result evaluation" to "attitude demonstration," navigating a middle ground between audience expectations and professional risk.

3.3. Remedial Performance: Mistakes as Narrative Material

Mistakes, misunderstandings, and unexpected events are inevitable in the workplace. In traditional contexts, such "performance disruptions" require immediate remedial repair to protect the professional image. In workplace vlogs, however, mistakes become highly valuable narrative resources—showing how one handles a crisis, admits errors, and learns from failure reinforces the "authentic persona" while simultaneously completing image repair and enhancement.

For example, bloggers have documented themselves apologizing to their team and working through the night to remedy a project delay caused by their own oversight. Such content often garners higher engagement than regular videos. Audiences witness not just the mistake itself, but a positive image of someone who is "responsible" and "willing to face challenges." In this sense, remedial performance transforms from a passive image-repair tactic into an active content-production strategy—bloggers not only fix the performance breach but also convert the remediation process into persona-reinforcing material.

4. Structural Dilemmas: The Erosion of Performance Boundaries and Risks of Alienation

4.1. The Structural Blurring of Front/Back Stage Boundaries

While the "mid-stage performance" strategy effectively enhances content appeal in the short term, it harbors an irresolvable structural contradiction: once the backstage is converted into front-stage content, where is the new backstage?

Goffman emphasized that the restorative function of the backstage depends precisely on it being an "unwatched" space. But as workplace vloggers continuously expose traditional backstage areas—their desks, commutes, and rest periods—these spaces lose their backstage qualification. Bloggers must maintain the performance posture of a "documentarian" even while filming scenes of "relaxation," attending to angles, lighting, framing, and narrative pacing. Post-shooting, they still face the "invisible labor" of editing, caption writing, and replying to comments. This means the traditional performance gaps needed for recovery are severely compressed.

More critically, this boundary erosion has a cumulative effect. The more bloggers expose, the higher the audience's expectation of "authenticity" rises, creating pressure for even more backstage visibility, forming a self-reinforcing cycle of "exposure—rising expectations—more exposure." The backstage risks being completely hollowed out, leaving bloggers with "nowhere to retreat" in their performance.

4.2. Role Overload and the Compounded Pressure of the Multi-Stage Front Stage

Workplace vloggers simultaneously shoulder multiple, often conflicting, role expectations: as professionals, they must meet employer performance standards and professional norms; as content creators, they must adhere to platform algorithms and update frequencies; as public figures, they must maintain the "authentic," "approachable," and "entertaining" persona fans expect; and as individuals, they must fulfill family, social, and personal life obligations.

The "multi-stage front stage" model proposed by Su and Liang (2026) illuminates the structural source of this dilemma: bloggers perform not on a single front stage but oscillate constantly among the interest front stage (professional field), the daily front stage (social media platform), and the intimate front stage (personal relationships). Each stage demands a distinct performance script with its own evaluative criteria, and these scripts often clash—professional rigor, content entertainment, and personal authenticity are not easily reconciled. When an individual is required to meet multiple front-stage expectations simultaneously, without sufficient backstage transition space, role overload becomes inevitable.

Niu and Xia (2026), in their analysis of graduate students, observed that "without a proper transitional zone, shuttling between multiple roles can easily create psychological fissures." This diagnosis applies equally to workplace vloggers. In fact, when "working" and "documenting work" become one, the buffer zone for role-switching is eliminated entirely; even after physically leaving the office, the blogger remains mentally in performance mode.

5. Boundary Maintenance: The Dialectics of Connection and Anti-Connection

The most direct anti-connection strategy is actively controlling the scope of visibility. Many workplace vloggers choose to block real-life colleagues, leaders, or specific groups from viewing content related to their jobs, thereby disrupting the gaze of "internal audiences." Some operate secondary "small accounts" for more personal content, restricting their main workplace vlog account to a "semi-professional" performance space. This "group-specific visibility" and "account differentiation" essentially artificially creates discontinuities within the continuous spectrum of the multi-stage front stage, assigning different visibility levels to different relational groups.

Additionally, many bloggers periodically delete or archive past content to sever the rigidification of image caused by excessive connection between the self and historical content. A post that suited a previous persona might become an "image burden" as career stage or self-perception evolves. Regular deletion and archiving of content essentially imposes a "shelf life" on performances in the temporal dimension, preventing historical material from being repeatedly scrutinized and

over-interpreted. Pan and Wang (2026) conceptualize this practice as a "barrier-focus" information management strategy—using widespread concealment as a barrier and selective pinning as a focal point to maintain an elastic boundary between visibility and invisibility.

6. Conclusion: Finding the Unperformable in Performance

Using dramaturgical theory as its analytical framework, this paper has systematically examined the strategic logic, structural dilemmas, and coping practices of self-presentation among workplace vloggers. The research demonstrates that the core performative strategy of workplace vlogs is "mid-stage performance"—selectively exposing backstage elements to construct a sense of authenticity, transforming "authenticity" itself into a consumable front-stage symbol. This strategy, however, contains an inherent paradox: while front-staging the backstage effectively enhances appeal in the short term, it leads to a systematic compression of backstage space. Under the cumulative pressures of role overload, internalized gaze, and dissolving boundaries, bloggers face persistent risks of alienation.

The case of workplace vlogs illuminates a more general proposition: in an era where digital platforms are deeply embedded in everyday life, self-presentation is shifting from a "situational social interaction" to a "continuous existential burden." As more and more domains of life are translated into watchable content, and as more social relationships are converted into audience relationships, individuals lose the genuine backstage in Goffman's sense—a space where they can take off the mask and stop performing. This is not a predicament unique to a particular group of bloggers; it is a structural condition faced by all "visible" individuals in platformized societies.

This does not imply complete pessimism. The strategic oscillation between connection and anti-connection among workplace vloggers suggests that individual agency is not entirely lost. Through boundary-management practices such as group-specific visibility, content deletion, and cadence control, they tenaciously draw limited "invisible zones" within the inevitability of being watched. These practices are fragile and imperfect, yet they point to a possibility: in an age where performance has become a mode of survival, the final line of defense against the total dissolution of the self may lie in continuously and strategically guarding those cracks where performance is impossible.

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