

The Bidirectional Construction of Labeled Communication on Social Media and the Image of “Internet Celebrity Reporters”

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of the rapid development of digital media technologies, social media platforms have become core arenas for information dissemination and public interaction. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of labeled communication on social media, exploring its mechanisms of influence on the image construction of individuals and groups. The study reveals that labeled communication simplifies cognition and reinforces stereotypes of communication objects through symbolic coding and group categorization, manifesting in three main types: group labeling, event labeling, and regional labeling, each carrying risks of cognitive simplification and biased reinforcement. Meanwhile, communication subjects engage in identity negotiation through “spectacularized” self-presentation by actively adapting to, resisting, or reconstructing labels. Driven by a combination of social structural factors (simplified projection of social contradictions), economic logic (dominance of attention economy), and psychological mechanisms (cognitive shortcuts of stereotypes), labeled communication exerts complex effects. Through case studies of labeled news reporting and practices of “internet celebrity reporters,” this paper further illustrates that the image construction of “internet celebrity reporters” is perpetually caught in a game among institutional discipline, platform logic, and individual expression. Labeled communication, while enhancing visibility and dissemination efficiency, also leads to professional identity alienation and cognitive biases. The study proposes multi-level collaborative efforts, including journalists adhering to professional ethics, platforms optimizing algorithmic mechanisms, and society improving media critical literacy—to optimize the social media communication ecosystem, providing theoretical and practical insights for understanding media image construction in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media; labeled communication; image construction; spectacularization; identity.

1. Introduction

With the widespread popularization of 4G/5G networks and the rapid rise of short-video platforms, social media has gradually become a core carrier of user-generated content (UGC). Data from the 2024 Research Report on China's Online Audio-Visual Development shows that short-video applications maintain the highest user stickiness among all app categories, with the combined user penetration rate of mainstream platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou exceeding 50%, forming a "mass communication" media ecosystem. In this context, "labels," as convenient tool for information classification, are continuously reinforced by algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, becoming a key means of shaping public perception.

The phenomenon of labeling in news reporting has long attracted academic attention. Scholars have noted that to pursue communication efficiency, media often attach labels to specific groups (e.g., "second-generation rich," "female college students"), events (e.g., incidents involving "nail households"), or regions (e.g., "Snow Town"). While this approach enables rapid information transmission, it easily leads to the formation of stereotypes and cognitive biases [1]. In the age of social media, such labeled information processing has been amplified by algorithms, transforming labels from mere classification tools into "frames" of public cognition [2].

Meanwhile, the "internet celebrity" practices of traditional media reporters on social platforms highlight the profound tension between labeled communication and professional image construction. Studies indicate that the identity recognition of "internet celebrity reporters" on social platforms like Weibo is perpetually caught in an "ambiguous tug-of-war" between institutional discipline, platform logic, and individual expression. Their image construction relies on the visibility afforded by labels while being constrained by the role solidification caused by these labels [3]. For instance, some reporters gain massive attention through the "positive energy" label but are thereby confined to a singular image framework, struggling to showcase the diversity of their professional identities.

The influence of labeled communication on social media is multi-dimensional and complex. It not only transforms information dissemination patterns but also profoundly impacts the image shaping of individuals and groups. For "internet celebrity reporters," labeled communication brings attention while plunging them into dilemmas of professional image construction: balancing traffic from labels with professional identity, and reconciling platform algorithmic discipline with the autonomy of personal expression.

Exploring the relationship between labeled communication and the image construction of "internet celebrity reporters" offers a crucial perspective for understanding media image construction mechanisms in the digital era. It reveals the operational logic of labels as symbolic tools in image shaping and provides practical references for traditional media practitioners to adapt to the social media environment and build positive professional images. This study aims to investigate how labeled communication on social media affects individual and group image construction, analyze how communication subjects negotiate identities through labeling practices, and uncover the power relations and cognitive mechanisms embedded in this interactive process.

2. Types and Mechanisms of Labeled Communication

2.1 Three Types of Labeled Communication

Media often label communication objects based on various criteria, which, due to rapid dissemination and strong interactivity on social media, spread more easily. These primarily include group, event, and regional labeling, each with distinct characteristics and impacts.

Group labeling simplifies the complexity of groups through attributes such as gender or occupation, often carrying value judgments. Scholars have pointed out that labels like "bingyuan (pretending to be ill for profit)" and "foyuan (Buddhist-style socialites)" essentially stigmatize women, generalizing individual phenomena into group traits and reinforcing stereotypes [1]. In the "bingyuan" incident, media attached the label "faking illness to promote products" to bloggers due to their elaborate makeup in hospital settings, ignoring individual differences. This not only led to online violence against the individuals involved but also solidified the public's singular perception of women's images. From a discursive construction perspective, such labels create cognitive shortcuts through selective presentation but often at the expense of truth [4]. Patterned narratives of specific events constitute another key form of labeled communication. Event labeling manifests as patterned narratives: when similar events occur, media summarize them with fixed labels to form "event prototypes." After the "Fan Paopao (Fan the Runner)" label emerged, all "escapers" in similar incidents were framed under this category; following the murder of Didi passengers, "Didi drivers" were excessively associated with negative meanings, triggering a trust crisis despite most drivers being compliant. Such narratives negate the uniqueness of events, leading the public to judge based on

labels and resulting in cognitive biases [5].

Prejudiced labeling of specific regions is also a common type of labeled communication. Regional labeling easily triggers group antagonism, often forming fixed perceptions linked to economy and culture. After the “Snow Town overcharging” incident, the label expanded to the entire Northeast Chinese tourism market, fostering regional prejudice; baseless labels like “Henan people steal manhole covers” spread on social media, becoming “default settings” in cognition. Their harm lies in elevating individual phenomena to judgments of group character, hindering the diverse presentation of regional images and potentially serving as “scapegoats” for social conflicts [6].

2.2 Driving Mechanisms of Labeled Communication

The prevalence of labeled communication is no accident but the result of the interplay of social structure, economic logic, and psychological mechanisms, which intertwine in the social media environment to promote labeling as one of the dominant modes of information dissemination.

From a social structural perspective, the underlying motivation for labeling lies in the simplification and projection of social contradictions. A scholar noted in the “network society” theory that media symbols are often mirrors of social reality [7]. The popularity of the “second-generation rich” label essentially reflects social anxiety caused by widening wealth gaps—by labeling the wealthy as “arrogant” and “irresponsible,” the public vents dissatisfaction with class solidification; the frequent appearance of the “rural left-behind women” label is linked to unbalanced urban-rural development. Media highlight traits like “vulnerability” and “loneliness,” presenting social issues while simplifying their complexity (e.g., ignoring the autonomous choices and capabilities of left-behind women). This labeled handling of social contradictions quickly resonates with the public but masks in the systematic and diverse nature of problems, making solutions difficult to address root causes.

In the media ecosystem dominated by “attention economy,” labeling has become a core strategy to attract traffic. The algorithmic logic of social media platforms centers on “interaction volume,” and labeled content, which easily triggers emotional resonance and facilitates quick comprehension, is more likely to gain high clicks and reposts [8]. Sensational labeled headlines like “Shocking! Overcharging again in XX place” stimulates user curiosity through conflict and suspense; platforms’ traffic tilts toward highly interactive labels further reinforces the vicious cycle of “the more extreme the label, the wider the dissemination.” Scholars have found that “internet celebrity reporters” of-

ten actively adapt to platform-preferred labels like “#positive energy” and “#hard-hitting interviews” to enhance account visibility, a practice that may temporarily boost traffic but risks subordinating content production to algorithms and deviating from professional values [7].

Social psychology’s “stereotype” theory provides a cognitive explanation for labeled communication. Humans follow the “least effort principle” in information processing, tending to simplify cognitive burdens through categorization [1]. Labeling precisely caters to this need: by classifying complex people, events, and objects into fixed categories, audiences can form judgments without in-depth thinking. For example, “post-90s” are labeled as “rebellious” or “Buddhist,” and “civil servants” as “stable” or “conservative.” While these labels reduce cognitive costs, they also lead to “black-and-white” biases—ignoring individual differences and absolutizing group traits. In social media, this cognitive mechanism is amplified by information overload: users encounter massive information daily, and labels act as “filters,” yet this also strengthens cognitive limitations [9].

3. Image Construction Practices Under Labeled Communication

3.1 “Spectacularized” Self-Presentation: From Passive Labeling to Active Performance

Guy Debord proposed that all existence in modern society is transformed into a „grand accumulation of spectacles,“ and image construction becomes a process of symbolic performance [10]. In social media, labeled communication further intensifies this „spectacularization“-communication subjects not only passively accept labels but also actively shape images meeting public expectations through labeled symbols, as evident in the practices of „internet celebrity reporters“ and rural left-behind women.

„Internet celebrity reporters“ are typical of „spectacularized“ self-presentation. CCTV reporter Wang Bingbing rose to fame with the label „national reporter,“ her social media content deliberately emphasizing „youthful vitality“ and „professional reliability“: using the „#hard-hitting interviews“ label to highlight professionalism in work scenarios and „#girl-next-door“ to build intimacy in daily settings. This strategy blurs the boundary between „reporter“ and „internet celebrity“ but is performative, with content tailored to label settings, akin to the „front-stage“ elaboration described in Goffman’s „dramaturgical theory“ [11].

The short-video practices of rural left-behind women demonstrate another „spectacularization“ logic. Some

scholars found that their self-presentation is constrained by urban audiences' imagination of „rural life,“ with labels serving as bridges [12]. For example, the Douyin account „Xiaoying's Family“ repeatedly uses labeled symbols like „headscarves and aprons“ and „field work,“ retaining poverty scenarios even as their lives improve, gaining traffic and resonance through labels like „rural life.“ However, this solidifies the stereotype of „vulnerability and dependence,“ restricting diverse expression [13]. Essentially, both involve matching image construction with labels and audience expectations: simplifying complex selves into labeled „spectacles“ through symbolic selection, which enhances communication efficiency but may sacrifice authenticity, diluting individual uniqueness and diversity.

3.2 “Bidirectional Negotiation of Identity: The Game Between Institution, Platform, and Individual

The identity recognition of communication subjects is not static but dynamically formed through interactions between institutional discipline, platform logic, and individual expression. For „internet celebrity reporters,“ this bidirectional negotiation is particularly evident—their labeled image construction is perpetually in tension among the three, with each party attempting to influence identity definition through labels.

Traditional media institutions hold contradictory attitudes toward the labeled images of „internet celebrity reporters,“ encouraging the creation of personal IPs while controlling through discipline to prevent identity loss. The „Southern Celebrity Reporters Cultivation Program“ launched by Southern Newspaper Group exemplifies institutional promotion of reporters' „internet celebrity“ transformation—training reporters in social media use and personal account operation to enhance media influence through the „celebrity reporter“ label. However, institutions simultaneously exercise control through multiple mechanisms: in content review, a China Global Television Network (CGTN) reporter revealed that work-related content must undergo review to align with the „mainstream media reporter“ label; in account ownership, most media require reporter accounts to belong to the institution, with individuals required to transfer accounts upon departure to prevent „personal labels“ from escaping institutional control. This contradiction leaves „internet celebrity reporters“ oscillating in identity recognition: as institutional „spokespersons,“ they must maintain media image; as „individual creators,“ they need to gain audience recognition through personalized expression, a conflict often causing role confusion [6].

Social media platforms influence identity construction by guiding label choices of „internet celebrity reporters“ through algorithmic logic and traffic rules. Scholars have noted that new media technologies are not neutral tools, but discipline mechanisms embedded with platform values, and algorithmic recommendation essentially involves content filtering and ranking [12]. A Phoenix TV reporter mentioned that platform editors actively suggest following labels like „#hot events“ and „#positive energy“ for higher recommendability, while supporting less popular labels like „#in-depth investigation.“ This orientation forces „internet celebrity reporters“ to weigh between adhering to journalistic professionalism with career-aligned labels or catering to platform logic with high-traffic labels—a negotiation between professional and platform identities, with traffic pressure often compelling compromise to platform labels [10].

Facing institutional and platform constraints, some „internet celebrity reporters“ resist identity through label practices, reconstructing professional recognition. For example, after the overgeneralization of the „#positive energy“ label, an investigative reporter actively used labels like „#in-depth reporting“ and „#fact-checking“ to publish content exposing social issues, emphasizing the investigative function of reporters through label switching to distinguish from „entertainment internet celebrities.“ Such resistance is not isolated: after the controversial „bingyuan“ label, some female bloggers replaced stigmatizing labels with „#anti-cancer diary,“ demonstrating active reconstruction of label meanings by communication subjects [3]. The ability to negotiate depends on individuals' control over labels—subjects with higher media literacy are better at label innovation, retaining identity autonomy amid discipline.

4. Dialectical Impacts of Labeled Communication and Image Construction

The impact of labeled communication on image construction is not one-dimensional but presents a dialectical relationship between positive and negative effects. It enhances information dissemination efficiency and empowers marginalized groups while potentially causing cognitive biases and identity alienation, a duality evident in the practices of „internet celebrity reporters“ and other groups.

4.1 Positive Effects: Cognitive Efficiency and Identity Empowerment

In the information-overloaded social media environment, labeled communication enhances cognitive efficiency through keyword extraction, helping audiences quickly

locate information and form consensus. The widespread use of the „countermarcher“ label during the pandemic is a typical case: China National Radio’s report *The Lone Brave Are Not Alone* used the „#lonebrave“ label to refer to anti-pandemic workers, leveraging emotional resonance from pop culture symbols to enable the public to understand group contributions quickly, with related content trending immediately. This labeling not only simplified information transmission but also condensed social emotions-integrating scattered individual actions into a group image through labels like „#countermarchers“ and „#anti-pandemic heroes,“ strengthening collective identity. Technically, scholars argue that the value of new media technologies lies in reducing information acquisition costs, and labels, as technical tools, precisely fulfill this function [8].

Labeled communication also provides identity empowerment opportunities for „silenced groups“ in traditional media, enabling them to actively construct self-images. Rural left-behind women were often defined as passive „poor“ and „vulnerable“ in traditional media, but social media labels have changed this. Through labels like „#rural life“ and „#left-behind mothers,“ they independently publish content and tell their stories, presenting images different from traditional media—for example, some accounts showcase the toil and harvest of field work, reconstructing the stereotype of „reliance on relief“ with the „#hardworking and prosperous“ label; others share parenting daily life and emotional insights, breaking the „weakness“ label with „#independent women“ [13]. Despite being constrained by label frameworks, their subjectivity is significantly enhanced compared to absence or representation in traditional media, achieving a shift from „being shaped“ to „self-shaping.“

4.2 Negative Effects: Cognitive Bias and Identity Alienation

The risk of excessive labeling lies in forming the cognitive misunderstanding that “labels equal truth,” leading to one-sided judgments of individuals and groups. Scholars have noted that labeled reporting violates the principle of journalistic objectivity by emphasizing single traits through selective presentation and ignoring object complexity [14]. Long-term dissemination of regional labels like “Henan people steal manhole covers” has simplified public perception of Henan people into negative impressions, even triggering offline discrimination; the association of the “female driver” label with “poor skills,” lacking statistical support, repeatedly appears in traffic accident reports, fostering gender bias. The harm of such cognitive biases extends beyond individuals—when label-

ing rises to group cognition, it may trigger social antagonism, hindering the formation of a diverse and inclusive social ecology [15].

For “internet celebrity reporters,” labeled communication may cause professional identity alienation, trapping them in conflicts between traffic and professionalism. Studies have revealed the “digital labor” dilemma of “internet celebrity reporters”: to maintain labeled images like “#positive energy” and “#high popularity,” they must invest extra time in short-video production and live interactions, even sacrificing time for in-depth reporting. A reporter disclosed, “Besides completing 3 news articles weekly, I have to edit 2 one-minute short videos; traffic doesn’t affect income but impacts performance evaluation.” This labor alienation undermines professional value—when reporters’ core competitiveness shifts from “news quality” to “label popularity,” professionalism may give way to traffic logic. More seriously, some reporters publish unverified content to cater to vulgar labels like “#sensational headlines” and “#curiosity,” deviating from the professional norms of “objectivity and truth,” ultimately damaging media credibility [12].

From a dialectical perspective, the positive and negative effects of labeled communication essentially reflect the tension between efficiency and truth, visibility and diversity. It may sacrifice truth while enhancing communication efficiency and restrict diversity while granting identity visibility. Understanding this duality is a prerequisite for optimizing the social media image construction ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

Labeled communication and image construction on social media constitute a dynamic bidirectional shaping process: labels shape public cognitive frameworks through symbolic coding and algorithmic recommendation, influencing the image presentation of individuals and groups; communication subjects engage in identity negotiation through active adaptation, resistance, or reconstruction of labels amid the game between institutional discipline, platform logic, and individual expression. This process contains positive values such as enhancing communication efficiency and empowering marginalized groups, while also risking cognitive biases and identity alienation.

Optimizing the social media communication ecosystem requires multi-level collaboration. At the practitioner level, journalists should adhere to professional ethics, avoid abusing labels for traffic, and enhance media literacy to maintain critical thinking in labeled communication—skillfully using labels to boost content influence while vigilantly preventing professional identity solidification by la-

bels. At the platform level, social media needs to improve algorithmic mechanisms, reduce traffic tilt toward controversial labels, and establish label review and correction systems, such as warning systems for regional discrimination and group stigmatization labels; simultaneously, optimize evaluation mechanisms for “internet celebrity reporters,” balancing traffic indicators with news quality to reduce digital labor alienation. At the societal level, the public should enhance media critical abilities, recognize the simplification and limitations of labels, and actively deconstruct stereotypes; academia should strengthen interdisciplinary research on labeled communication, integrating communication, sociology, and psychology theories to provide more systematic academic support for practice. In the digital age, labeled communication reflects both the collective landscape of social cognition and weaves a diverse network of media images. Only by seeking balance between efficiency and truth, traffic and professionalism, discipline and resistance can social media be promoted as an inclusive and diverse space for image construction, transforming labels from cognitive “shortcuts” into bridges of understanding.

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