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Behind the digital mask: semi-anonymity and user self-disclosure in the Momo phenomenon on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. In contemporary society, where digitalization has fully permeated, social media has profoundly reshaped the fundamental paradigms of information dissemination and interpersonal interaction. However, with the strengthening of panoramic prison surveillance and the dissolution of online privacy boundaries, users are facing an unprecedented tension between pursuing social connections and safeguarding personal privacy. Against this backdrop, the Momo phenomenon emerged on the Xiaohongshu platform, where many users voluntarily adopted uniform pink dinosaur avatars and nicknames, forming a large, semi-anonymous group and becoming a unique cultural landscape and social practice. This study aims to deeply analyze the Momo phenomenon on the Xiaohongshu platform through a literature review and theoretical analysis, and to explore how anonymity changes users' risk-perception structure and thereby motivates their self-disclosure behaviour. Based on the Privacy Calculus Model, the research reveals that by adopting standardized identities, users effectively reduce the social risks and psychological costs of self-disclosure, making the benefits of a sense of security and belonging exceed the potential costs of privacy leakage. Meanwhile, the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) explains the high degree of collective identity and behavioral consistency exhibited by this group in specific situations: deindividuation does not lead to simple disorder but rather prompts individuals to shift from personal identity to group identity. This mechanism is a double-edged sword. It not only provides a haven for marginal viewpoints and emotional venting but may also induce group polarization and cyber violence through moral disengagement.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu, Momo phenomenon, semi-anonymity self-disclosure, privacy calculus, deindividuation

1. Introduction

In the current digital wave, social media has become the core force reshaping the patterns of information dissemination and interpersonal interaction, significantly lowering the barriers for individuals to create content and obtain information. As early as 1973, Granovetter proposed the concept of weak connections, pointing out that in social networks, there exist both strong connections based on intimate relationships and weak connections based on loose relationships, and the latter reveal a new social dimension. Castells [1] further pointed out the promoting effect of the Internet on weak connections: The Internet environment, with its characteristics of low cost and high efficiency, enables individuals who have never met to conduct large-scale

information transmission across time and space barriers, greatly expanding the geographical scope and interaction efficiency of social communication. However, the convenience this technology offers comes at a cost. With the widespread adoption of data technology, the boundary between physical and virtual spaces is becoming increasingly blurred. While information technology eliminates the limitations of time and space, it also brings serious privacy problems, such as the protection of private space [2]. The online behaviors of individuals are constantly recorded, tracked, and examined, making the Internet a digital panoramic prison in the modern sense [3]. In this context, privacy is defined as the basic ability and right of an individual to manage personal information effectively, that is, to confirm the scope and nature of personal information transmitted to others [4]. To resist external scrutiny and protect their inner emotional world from public judgment, users have begun seeking strategies that can both maintain social connections and avoid identity exposure [3]. This tension is particularly evident on the Xiaohongshu platform. As a mainstream grass-planting and experience-sharing platform in China, Xiaohongshu's main user group consists of young women aged 18 to 25. On this platform, which originally emphasized the display of a refined life and highly accurate algorithmic recommendations, users are facing more stringent aesthetic gazes and pressure to showcase their identities than ever before. It is precisely in response to this urgent need to maintain a safe social distance that a trend has emerged, directly boosting the popularity of the semi-anonymous social model Momo. The Momo phenomenon originated on Douban, then rapidly spread and became localized on social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin. The main feature of this group is that they use the platform's default pink dinosaur avatars and the nickname Momo.

In terms of its origin, this phenomenon initially originated from the platform automatically assigning a unified nickname, Momo, and default cartoon avatars to new users who had not set personalized profiles. However, this system's default setting, originally intended to simplify the registration process, exceeded its original functional attributes and evolved into a symbolic collective identity identifier through spontaneous imitation, replication, and aggregation by users in the later stage. For many young users, Momo is no longer a meaningless system code name but represents a large online community that chooses to hide its identity. Members of the group have achieved a state of collective invisibility by adopting standardized avatars and voluntarily giving up personalized displays. They are eager to integrate into online community discussions. However, by avoiding revealing more of their personal characteristics, they aim to prevent excessive exposure of their personal information and reduce the risk of being recognized by acquaintances. This behavioral pattern reflects the delicate balance and strategic adaptation users strike between participating in public discussions and protecting their privacy. It should be particularly noted that the Momo phenomenon is not traditional complete anonymity, but rather a semi-anonymous practice based on the platform's account system. The user retained the main body of the account, allowing them to follow other accounts and interact in the community. However, on the front desk display, they chose a unified, de-personalized mask. Zhou & Wu [3] noted that this kind of behaviour creates a stable, efficient interactive network in which members gain a sense of identity and security. However, this kind of group anonymity also brings about complex social effects. While protecting individuals, it may also become a breeding ground for negative behaviors such as cyber violence and fraud crimes. Therefore, this study aims to deeply analyze the driving mechanism behind the Momo phenomenon on Xiaohongshu, examine the self-presentation strategies of group members, especially how the special semi-anonymity has reshaped users' self-disclosure behaviour and the dual social impacts it entails, and provide a new perspective on contemporary online anonymity behaviour.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework: semi-anonymous social interaction

Social Networking Services (SNS), as platforms for people to showcase themselves, maintain interpersonal relationships, and communicate with others [5], are constantly evolving in form. In China, SNS, represented by Sina Weibo, has become mainstream [6], and the core logic of social interaction has always centered on self-disclosure. However, with the shift from strong connections based on acquaintances to semi-anonymous weak connections, users' interaction mode has undergone a qualitative change. The emergence of the Momo phenomenon is a typical example of this transformation process. To gain a deeper understanding of its inherent logic, this chapter will first define its impact on the platform ecosystem and then introduce relevant theories to analyze the psychological mechanisms behind it. The Momo phenomenon belongs to a unique semi-anonymous mode that differs from the traditional fully anonymous mode. Most Momo users use this anonymous method only for their names and avatars, and they still post their own content on their personal homepages. Behind this kind of behavior lies a greater tendency towards a sense of group dependence rather than the pursuit of complete anonymity. Therefore, this model ingeniously meets users' dual demands for the security provided by anonymity and the sense of belonging fostered by social interaction. However, this model is a double-edged sword. While it brings positive impacts, it also hides risks, which will be analyzed in detail later. To explore the reasons behind these dual effects caused by anonymity, this chapter first defines its impact on the platform ecosystem. Then it introduces the Privacy Calculus Model and the Self-disclosure theory as analytical tools.

2.1. The dual effects of semi-anonymity: platform restructuring under the Momo phenomenon

The Momo phenomenon, as a large-scale collective behavior, has profoundly influenced the social ecosystem of platforms like Xiaohongshu. It is not a single-dimensional existence but a double-edged sword: it enhances weak-relationship social interaction by providing a sense of security, but it also poses huge risks, such as cyber violence and group extremism, due to its anonymity.

2.1.1. Positive effects: psychological safety and collective empowerment

Firstly, the unified external image of Momo builds a psychological safety buffer zone for users. In this Momo group, composed of countless identical avatars and nicknames, individuals are submerged, and their personal online history and identity background are difficult to track. This effectively helps users avoid the social pressure from big data algorithms and from being recognized by acquaintances. The risk of social death has been avoided. This mechanism simultaneously creates a strong sense of trust within the community, as anonymity and self-media weaken the role of the opinion climate. In real-name or familiar social interactions, individuals often refrain from expressing dissenting opinions out of fear of isolation. However, the anonymous online environment allows individuals to freely express their opinions without worrying about public pressure [7]. Users use the Momo identity to avoid the circle of acquaintances and social norms, to disguise themselves, and to interact with others online. In such an environment, expressing opinions different from others becomes much more relaxed and freer. People are no longer suppressed for expressing different voices, which greatly reduces social pressure and provides greater security, enabling users to express their true opinions that might be suppressed in real life. Secondly, this collective identity empowers users to act on specific public issues, especially when expressing positions or protesting particular events. Momo is not only a cover but has also become a symbol of collective identity. The Viola incident that occurred in early 2025 is a typical case: the Xiaohongshu blogger Viola was banned for posting content on gender and class issues, sparking protests from many users. To show support for the blogger, countless netizens changed their profile pictures and names to

the same as hers and commented in the comment section, We are all Viola. Viola can never be killed. This phenomenon is precisely a manifestation of a semi-anonymous model like the Momo culture. At this point, the unified avatar evolved into a protest symbol, a decentralized and hard-to-eliminate collective voice. This semi-anonymous mode not only protects participants' safety but also fosters strong collective consensus, demonstrating the unique advantages of weakly connected networks in social mobilization and enabling marginalized groups to participate in the construction of public discourse in a relatively safe way [8]. From the perspective of establishing social relationships, the Momo phenomenon promotes interactions based on weak connections. Zhou & Wu [3] noted that people seek to establish appropriate relationships with strangers online to adapt to social changes and protect their emotions from public judgment. The Momo phenomenon has broken through the boundaries of time and space, allowing netizens to freely express their opinions without bearing real consequences and to quickly and anonymously shape their personal images. Unrestricted social interaction can shape one's role externally through self-expression, relieve social pressure, and exist as a spiritual support for users. Although online relationships may be colder than real ones, this kind of self-exposure based on weak connections can shorten the formation stage of interpersonal relationships, reduce social awkwardness in real life, relieve the tension of the first interaction, and rapidly warm up the relationship between individuals [3].

2.1.2. Negative effects: moral disengagement and group polarization

However, Momo's anonymity also harbors tremendous destructive power. When individuals hide behind the collective mask and their responsibilities are diluted, it is easy to induce moral disengagement. The research by Paciello et al. [9] found that anonymity is a key variable that induces moral disengagement, which in turn leads to cyberbullying. First, group polarization is particularly pronounced in the Momo group. Group members tend to take more extreme positions than their original viewpoints in discussions to seek group identity. Individuals who are vulnerable to group pressure and influence lose their ability to think independently, which in turn leads to behavioral deviations [10]. One example is the Fat Cat suicide incident in May 2024. Fat Cat was a 21-year-old game proxy player who had a two-year online relationship with a 28-year-old girl named Tan. He transferred 500,000 yuan to her. Later, after his girlfriend broke up with him, he jumped into the river in Chongqing and committed suicide. After the fat cat's death, her sister, Liu, exposed the chat and transfer records between her brother and Tan on the Internet. In the absence of complete information, online public opinion rapidly escalated. Many netizens changed the profile picture of the fat cat before her death and carried out online violence against the involved girl, Tan, in the comment section, and even stole her personal information through human flesh search. Although the police eventually clarified the facts and pointed out that the fat cat sister deliberately guided public opinion, the harm caused by the cyber violence had already been done. This phenomenon can be explained by the carnival theory proposed by Bakhtin in the 1960s [11]. Cyberspace has become a digital carnival square, and the formal life full of rules is in opposition to the carnival life. Under Momo's mask, the social norms of the real world are temporarily suspended, and the homogenized identities make the remarks more emotional and bold. Users vent their likes and dislikes more directly, even losing their ability to think independently, falling into blind group fanaticism, and criticizing social events more intensely. Secondly, anonymity has greatly lowered the threshold for cyber violence. Many users subconsciously believe that other Momos will be held responsible, thereby developing a sense that the law will not punish the majority. The dilution of responsibility is also more likely to damage the group's reputation rather than that of individual users, thereby leading to more serious violent incidents. The lack of anonymity, such as facial contact and identity recognition, also significantly increases aggressive behavior in communication [12]. This diffusion of responsibility has led to an increase in aggressive remarks. When thousands of Momos launch attacks, the negative impact they create is often more destructive than traditional

cyberbullying. When some Momo users post irresponsible remarks or engage in deceptive behavior, negative labels may be affixed to the entire Momo community. This kind of visual anonymity of the front desk will, to a greater extent, induce users' sense of luck and impulsive behavior.

2.2. Theoretical mechanism linking semi-anonymity and self-disclosure

Self-disclosure, that is, the behavior of people expressing their thoughts, opinions, and emotions to others [13], is the foundation for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. In the online environment, compared with the real world, computer-mediated communication can encourage people to disclose more about themselves [14]. When users believe that their identities cannot be easily identified, they tend to be more willing to express their thoughts and feelings [15], and the Internet thus becomes a field where emotions can be openly vented, thereby further promoting self-disclosure [16]. In social networks, self-disclosure is of great significance for establishing and maintaining online interpersonal relationships [17], helping people build trust and intimacy and shape their personal image [18]. This kind of disclosure can be divided into two categories: positive and negative. Positive disclosure aims to reveal positive information to increase attractiveness, while negative disclosure discloses hidden information that may affect reputation. Due to the reduced risk of rejection and opposition in the online environment, users are more inclined to self-disclose. SNS such as Weibo have also become important platforms for documenting life [19]. To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons why Momo users are motivated to self-disclose in a semi-anonymous environment, this section will introduce two core theories: the Privacy Calculus Model and the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE).

2.2.1. Privacy Calculus Model

Firstly, a user's decision to become a Momo and their disclosure can be regarded as a rational calculation. The Privacy Calculus Model holds that users conduct a rational cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether to disclose personal information [20, 21]. The basic logic is that if a person perceives high benefits (such as psychological satisfaction, social support, and convenience) in a specific situation that outweigh potential costs (such as information leakage, negative evaluations, and security risks), then the likelihood of self-disclosure will increase. In the traditional environment of real-name or personalized accounts on Xiaohongshu, the cost of self-disclosure is extremely high. A carefully maintained personal image may collapse, and genuine emotional venting may invite scrutiny from acquaintances or attacks from strangers. However, the Momo phenomenon reconstructs this formula through depersonalization. A uniform avatar has greatly reduced the expected cost of information leakage and negative reviews. Momo's identity is like an invisibility cloak, making it difficult to integrate an individual's online footprints and thus minimizing privacy risks. In a semi-anonymous state, users can express their emotions more authentically, seek advice, and even vent negative feelings without worrying about the breakdown of real interpersonal relationships. In this context, users believe that the benefits (a safe space for expression) far outweigh the risks (the possibility of being identified), thereby motivating deeper self-disclosure [22]. Especially when they wish to speak out at a public event, the protection of collective identity reduces the risks borne by individuals to near zero, thereby magnifying the benefits of collective action. This also greatly encourages users to join the Momo ranks.

2.2.2. Deindividuation and the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)

Privacy Calculus explains why users choose anonymity, but it is insufficient to fully account for the high consistency and group behaviour observed among users after anonymity. To this end, it needs to introduce an advanced perspective of the theory of de-individualisation. The early deindividuation theory originated from the famous research of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo in the 1960s and 1970s [23, 24]. It holds that the characteristic of deindividuation is the reduction of an individual's private self-awareness and sense of

responsibility, resulting in a decline in self-regulation ability. The reduced attention to others' reactions is due to individuals' inability to be identified or distinguished within the group [25]. Obviously, the Internet is a place where such social conditions exist. Even just working on a computer, without interacting with others, seems to lead to a certain degree of self-awareness separation. People who participated in the survey via computer terminals reported less social anxiety, stronger self-esteem, and less compliance with social norms than those who completed the same survey with pen and paper [26]. However, the Momo community is not completely disordered; instead, it often demonstrates a high degree of unity. The SIDE proposed by Lea & Spears [27] provides a more interpretive perspective, integrating the classic deindividualization theory. It assumes that anonymity leads to greater deindividualization, reduced self-awareness, and increased group consistency [28]. When anonymous identities mask users' personal characteristics, their cognition of which group they belong to becomes particularly salient, making group identities, beliefs, and stereotypes even more prominent [28]. At this point, an individual's behaviour will no longer follow their personal norms but will instead closely adhere to the norms and goals of the group they identify with.

2.2.3. From individual calculation to collective action: an integrated mechanism

By combining the two theories above, we can clearly depict the closed loop of the incentive mechanism for self-disclosure in the Momo phenomenon. First is the access mechanism (Privacy Calculus): Based on rational calculation, users, to avoid the scrutiny of the digital panorama prison, choose to put on the Momo disguise in exchange for high freedom of expression at a low cost. Then comes the reinforcement mechanism (SIDE): once in this semi-anonymous state, the SIDE effect begins to take hold. Users are not only hiding their identities but also establishing new social identities. When group norms are positive (as in the Viola incident), the group's common goal is to support freedom of speech and resist injustice. The SIDE effect prompts individuals to be more courageous in self-disclosure for the group's goals, demonstrating constructive power. When group norms turn negative (as in the Fat Cat incident), individuals exhibit a high degree of aggression in group blind obedience, as aggression is seen as behaviour in line with group norms. Anonymity, by disconnecting online behaviour from real identity and liberating individuals from social norms [29], leads to more aggressive behaviour than traditional bullying. Therefore, the behavioural trends of the Momo group are not entirely random or chaotic, but rather depend on the consensus and norms that form within the group in a given situation. This provides a profound theoretical basis for understanding self-disclosure in a semi-anonymous environment and offers inspiration for platform governance.

3. Research gaps and contributions

3.1. Limitations of existing research and contributions of this study

By analyzing the Momo phenomenon, this study partially fills the gap in existing research. At present, academic research on online behavior mostly focuses on two extremes: completely real-name socializing and completely anonymous socializing. For the semi-anonymous social model that lies between the two, where users are anonymous but have persistent account homepages and social accumulation, the complex user motivations and group dynamics have not been fully explored. The main contribution of this research is as follows: first, it has expanded the theory's application scenarios. The Privacy Calculus Model, self-disclosure model, and SIDE theory were innovatively integrated and applied to the emerging field of Xiaohongshu's semi-anonymous social interaction, thereby verifying and enriching the explanatory power of these classic theories in the era of the mobile Internet and algorithmic recommendation. Second, it reveals the dual mechanism of semi-anonymity. It systematically explains how the Momo phenomenon, as a double-edged

sword, simultaneously meets users' demands for security and belonging while also posing risks such as group polarization and cyber violence. Thirdly, a governance perspective with practical significance was proposed. Research shows that the essence of the Momo phenomenon is users' adaptation to the platform environment. Therefore, it provides governance ideas for platforms like Xiaohongshu: The focus of management should not be simply on bans or mandatory real-name registration, but rather on how to guide group norms and transform the power of anonymous groups into constructive community capital.

3.2. Future research

This study is mainly based on case analysis and theoretical deduction. There is still ample room for exploration in the future. In the future, we can start from the influence of interactive feedback and conduct in-depth research on how the interactive feedback (such as likes, supportive comments, and aggressive comments) received by users in the Momo group after they post deeply expressed opinions can, in turn, strengthen or inhibit their future willingness to express. Longitudinal research can also be conducted, with long-term tracking and observation of anonymous communities like Momo. By combining questionnaires and in-depth interviews, quantitative analysis can be conducted on the evolution of their internal norms, the flow of member identities, and changes in their roles across different social events.

4. Conclusion

The Momo phenomenon is not an isolated online wonder, but rather a product of the continuous game and trade-off among netizens' pursuit of individual expression, social connection, and privacy security in the context of the digital age. This article, through an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, draws the following conclusions: First, the semi-anonymous social model represented by the Momo phenomenon precisely addresses the dual core demands of contemporary netizens: they long for the freedom and security of expression under the protection of anonymity, while also seeking a sense of belonging and identity by joining a visible collective. This strategy is a creative adaptation to the digital panoramic prison. Second, this model is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, it can create a psychologically safe space, protect user privacy, and build consensus on specific issues, thereby forming a powerful collective voice. On the negative side, anonymity dilutes an individual's sense of responsibility and can trigger destructive behaviors such as group polarization, cyber violence, and the spread of rumors, harming the platform ecosystem and individuals. Thirdly, by integrating the Privacy Calculus Model and the SIDE model, we can systematically explain the behavioral logic of Momo users. The participation of users is a rational choice after weighing the pros and cons, and whether their behavior is constructive or destructive depends on which group norms are followed, the transformation from personal identity to social identity in an anonymous state. In conclusion, the rise of Momo is both an adaptation and a form of resistance to the current social media environment. It reminds us that users' privacy needs cannot be ignored, and that the governance approach of social platforms should shift from simple bans and silencing to more refined community guidance and regulatory frameworks, seeking a dynamic balance between protecting freedom of expression and maintaining community order.

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