Exploring Anonymous Social Communication from Subcultural Perspective: A Case Study of "Online Public Toilets"

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Abstract: The proliferation of social networks and the ascendancy of internet popular culture have heightened user concerns regarding personal privacy. This has given rise to a novel trend in social media: anonymous socialization. As a critical facet of online social interaction, anonymous socialization exhibits diversity across various subcultural domains, shaped by factors such as demographic characteristics, popular trends, and communicative attributes. The concept of "online public toilets" has swiftly gained traction on social platforms, particularly Weibo. Participants in this subculture adeptly employ homophonic wordplay, abbreviations in Pinyin, and cryptic language, including acronyms derived from internet jargon, thereby influencing the vibrancy of "online public toilets" and the evolution of anonymous socialization. Nonetheless, this trend has garnered scrutiny due to associated challenges like cyberbullying and the emergence of extremist groups. As a contemporary subcultural phenomenon, "online public toilets" offer a modicum of privacy protection. Simultaneously, they serve as conduits for the dissemination of negative sentiment, transforming these anonymous networks into congregations for the expression of adverse emotions.
Keywords: Subculture; Anonymous Socialization; Online Public Toilets; Communication Phenomena

1. Online Public Toilets: The Semi-Private Backstage Detached from Society

Erving Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory likens social interaction to a theatrical performance, where individuals adopt personas through the use of masks to craft an idealized image in the "front stage" of virtual environments. Ideally, the "backstage" is perceived as a private domain where individuals can freely express their genuine selves. Despite the sustained popularity of traditional social networking platforms like Weibo and Tencent QQ, there has been a surge in accounts targeting expansive audiences, leveraging these platforms to expand their reach—signaling the emergence of "online public toilets." The incidence of "bots" has increased significantly in recent years; these automated entities, mirroring the intentions of their creators, either autonomously compile content or selectively publish user submissions after review. Users participate in discussions within comment sections, creating niche communities. However, the atmosphere fostered by these "shouting across spaces bots" often lacks civility. Protected by anonymity, contributors feel empowered to express negative emotions freely, thus earning the epithet 'public toilets'.

1.1 The Concept and Evolution of Network Public Toilets

"Network public toilets, " also referred to as "toilet accounts, " are distinguished by their anonymity and are prevalent in subcultures such as anime enthusiasts, celebrity followers, and gaming communities. Users can submit content to these accounts via private messages, and the account owner posts these contributions anonymously. Technically, any online account designed for venting could be termed a "toilet, " regardless of its public accessibility. Owing to a strong sense of group identity, users within these subcultures tend to congregate. Consequently, "network toilets" typically revolve around specific themes, attract large followings, and exhibit widespread dispersion. When categorized by discussion topics, they can generally be segmented into three types: "two-dimensional toilets" that discuss fictional characters from various media; "2.5D toilets" that concentrate on celebrities and other public figures; and "three-dimensional toilets" that focus on everyday individuals. Essentially, these accounts serve as platforms for anonymous outcries in cyberspace. As implied by their name, the content shared via "network public toilets" is predominantly dark and negative. Individuals utilize these accounts for anonymous posts or vocal criticisms against specific groups or persons, often incorporating derogatory comments, curses, and insults. To evade detection by platform moderation systems, users may employ tactics such as encoding sensitive words in their Weibo profiles or restricting controversial content to followers only.

1.2 Current status of online public toilets

The primary attributes of "Online Public Toilets" encompass anonymity and seclusion, offering users a concealed haven that shields them from external disruptions, thereby enabling them to express themselves freely without the fear of revealing their true identities.

It is challenging to pinpoint the exact origin of China's first mainland internet "shout-out bot, " yet one widely acknowledged forerunner is the FF14 shout-bot, which originated from the 2019 game Final Fantasy 14. The initial purpose of this bot was to furnish players with a communicative platform on Weibo, a stark contrast to the toxic milieu now associated with these 'toilets'. The advent of the female-centric game Idol Dream Festival's shout-bot signified a shift from player-to-player interaction platforms to 'online public toilets'. With its plethora of characters and CP lines, the game gave rise to numerous complex love-hate dynamics. The norms within gaming circles mirror those in fan circles—criticizing characters and CPs under one's own identity could lead to collective backlash, thus necessitating the use of an anonymous outlet for expression. In today's digital landscape, it is recognized that wherever there is an audience, corresponding bots are likely to surface. Some bot accounts may have initially been created to foster a light-hearted, humorous environment but have since devolved into channels of negativity and extremism. "Online public toilets, " especially those centered around two-dimensional culture, have become increasingly critical when addressing issues related to appearance and family background, often receiving hostile submissions. For instance, in cosplay circles that range from prominent web celebrities with millions of followers to ordinary enthusiasts sharing images on their WeChat Moments, submissions might find their way into Weibo's "COS toilet".

Contributors often use homophones and slang to solicit opinions on these posts, with remarks generally skewing towards polarized perspectives. It is important to acknowledge that not all shout-out bots are malevolent; some continue to function as platforms for amateur creations like fan fiction, primarily appealing to niche audiences. However, some popular bots, such as those associated with the hit summer 2023 web drama "Mysterious Lotus Casebook (Lotus Tower)", known as "Towers' Toilet", strictly serve as venues for fans to share their creations while explicitly prohibiting actions such as insulting lead characters, inciting controversies, or making derogatory remarks.

2. Weak Tie Social: The Joy and Worry of Online Toilets

Entering the era of web3.0, individuals have ushered in a new stage of digital survival. In March 2015, the "Regulations on the Management of Internet User Account Names" were officially implemented. Due to the particularity of online communication, based on the principle of "voluntary disclosure upfront, real-name registration in background, " internet information service users are required to register their accounts after authenticating their identity information. Since then, every move individuals make online is recorded in a transparent information environment where their online traces and digital practices are electronic and data-based. Individuals exist within a "super panoptic prison, " while algorithms shape and train individuals' browsing behavior and search behavior on the internet. Against this backdrop, many social media users adjust privacy settings, change nicknames and IP addresses in an attempt to create a relatively private domain amidst an increasingly transparent internet space. Meanwhile, due to strong group identification among subcultural groups, users' social media accounts often fail to meet their emotional needs for expressing opinions and entertainment activities. Therefore, "online toilets" tailored for specific groups have emerged.

2.1 Backstage Guardianship: Collective Anonymous Group Identity and Privacy Protection

Due to widespread use of the internet and smart mobile devices by subculture circles whose participants are often young people with extreme expressions that easily spark debates or other issues; participants (often referred to as "toilet friends" or "toilet sisters") increasingly seek absolute anonymity in anonymous social interactions online so they can release themselves emotionally without constraints or societal judgment anonymously through various puns & abbreviations blocking outsiders from entering these spaces while avoiding platform keyword censorship mechanisms.

In complete anonymity status at "online toilets, " users can detach themselves from social norms & expectations regarding personal expression shield intimate relationship details express emotions freely out curiosity towards vast info resources venting feelings desires etc., displaying inner thoughts openly without pretense maintaining low discernibility while speaking freely sharing opinions moods showcasing true personalities unencumbered by offline facades without fear repercussions associated with breached personas become toilet sister reestablishing divides between public realms staunchly defending shrinking backstage space.

2.2 Growing Negativity: Negative Extremes at Online Toilets

On November 17th, the Cyberspace Administration announced nationwide month-long special action named "Clear Sky Cleanse - Eliminate Negative Behavior" targeting key platforms like social networks short videos live streams focusing seven major problem areas such as "online toilets" topping list; Scholar Bakhin argues existence two types lives one mundane another revelrous detached conventional boundaries into "toilets" daily revelries occur hanging out dirty laundry ("hanging someone up" meaning exposing others' photos actions remarks) pivotal step users adept using black humor slang convey mockery select circle insiders thereby fostering group unity noteworthy setting amplifying conflicts making rational discussions difficult gradually eroding collective reason some accounts intentionally provoke fights generate traffic while toilet friends enjoy pleasure free speech under cloak anonymity seeking attention via aggressive language gaining psychological affirmation already exceeding bounds civilized reasonable net usage infringing heavily upon citizens' individual rights reputation privacy

criminal acts liable defamation provocation causing trouble etc serious consequences perpetrators should take responsibility civil law possibly facing criminal charges including defamation affray etc significant harm not be underestimated.

3. Freedom vs Responsibility: Reflections on Online Toilets

Amidst current internet age anonymous interactions gain increasing focus among growing Z generation coupled with subcultures emergence "online toilets" inevitable yet speech's anonymization exposes inner malice leading pervasive cyberbullying pressing challenge Restriction Sense Responsibility fades away given total user protection allows freer articulation viewpoints experiences avoids potential stress societal judgement however security provided by this anonymity fuels weak tie relationships triggering array problems resulting lack accountability fosters casual reckless expressions attacks jeopardizing community harmony governance hurdles arise.

In conclusion, absolute freedom never truly exists any time enjoying speech privacy benefits brought about anonymous interactions always remember limits placed freedoms online cyberspace isn't lawless realm those nauseatingly vile cesspools must close down individuals surfing web adhere standards moral ethics uphold healthy positive virtual space every citizen's duty.

4. Conclusion

Through an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of "online public toilets, " it is not difficult to find that although anonymous social interaction provides a broad space for self-expression and sharing experiences for the Z-generation group, the freedom of speech it brings is not without constraints. While the anonymity of speech protects personal privacy, it also fosters malicious attacks and irresponsible attitudes, making online violence a pressing problem to be addressed on social platforms.

In the light of Le Bon's theory, we realize that the lack of a sense of responsibility caused by group anonymity is one of the root causes of the "online public toilets" problem. Although this anonymity provides users with a sense of security, it also weakens the constraints of social norms and moral ethics, making individuals more prone to losing rationality when expressing opinions, and even publishing remarks that harm social harmony.

Therefore, we must soberly realize that the online world is not beyond the law, and freedom of speech under anonymous social interaction also needs to be regulated and constrained. Those "online public toilets" full of malice and aggression should be rectified and shut down to maintain the health and harmony of cyberspace. At the same time, while enjoying the convenience of the internet, every citizen should consciously abide by internet norms, uphold the bottom line of social morals and ethics, and jointly create a positive, healthy, and orderly online environment.

In the end, we hope that through the joint efforts of the whole society, the internet will become a bridge connecting people's hearts, rather than a breeding ground for malice. Finding a balance between freedom and responsibility, making cyberspace a truly important force for promoting social progress and enhancing the well-being of the people.

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