The users’ activities on Yiguan: An Audience Analysis on An Anonymous Social Media

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Abstract

Yiguan is a new-emerging mobile application which is popular in China. Different from the traditional social media, Yiguan enables users to have interaction and communications anonymously online. Compared to other anonymous social media, Yiguan is neither proximity-based nor tie-based. The identity of Yiguan users can be completely anonymous. Users will not have a personal profile and home pages on Yiguan. Anonymity makes it possible that users wear masks when they present themselves and interact with others. It is possible for them to get rid of the constraint, escaping from repetitive everyday life. This thesis based on the empirical qualitative research, conduct an audience analysis on Yiguan’s users. I’d like to explore what users do on Yiguan and how they utilize the space of Yiguan. This thesis wishes to identify the activities of users on Yiguan, and explore the characteristics of user’s activities. Combing the critical theories from Mead, Goffman, and Walther, this thesis will provide a vivid sketch of users on Yiguan.

Keywords: Yiguan, anonymous social media, self-presentation, dramaturgy, social media interaction, hyperpersonal interaction
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In China, Chinese social media platforms have achieved unprecedented growth in the last two decades. At the end of 2017, about 772 million Chinese citizens had access to the Internet, making China the number one country with the largest online users in the world (Wang, 2018, p.1). In addition to that, China has a whopping 911 million active social media users compared with the U.S., which has 207 million active social media users (George, 2018, p.1). The development of Chinese social media stems from people’s active use of mobile phones. Out of all Chinese social media users, 97.5% used their phones to connect to the Internet (Wang, 2018, p.1). Recent findings also indicate that China’s mobile netizens make a considerable number of their purchases with their smartphones. A high percentage of consumers use their phones to make payments (70%), do their shopping (67.2%) and book their travel (39.7%) (Wang, 2018, p.1). This consumer buying behavior explains why China’s e-commerce consumer spending is valued at a whopping $499 billion (George, 2018, p.1).

China’s social media and e-commerce platforms are extremely concerned about targeting online customers through mobile phones. This means that “mobile first” is inevitable (Wang, 2018, p.1). When social media developers wish to create platforms for media use, their first priority is to establish a mobile application. This inclination has also resulted in a massive shift in the country’s media use. People read the news, use messaging services, watch movies, shop and pay their bills on their phones (Wang, 2018, p.1). In short, Chinese users rely so much on their phones to manage most of their business and leisure activities (Wang, 2018, p.1).

However, the prevalence of smartphones in China’s business environment and leisure time has resulted in a highly competitive market for smartphone apps (Wang, 2018, p.1). For every dominant app in the western countries, such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, there are up to 20 apps with similar functions fighting for market share in
the Chinese market (Wang, 2018, p.1). An example is Sina Weibo, a Chinese Twitter-like social media platform that is competing with Facebook and Twitter.

Although China’s social media landscape is very diverse, just like the one in western countries, only a few companies and platforms like WeChat or Sina Weibo have successfully attracted a large number of committed users over time (Wang, 2018, p.1). Video streaming platforms are also becoming increasingly popular in China. Currently, China’s two biggest brands are Alibaba’s Youku Tudou and Baidu’s iQiyi, both of which are endorsed by more than 500 million active users (Wang, 2018, p.1).

With the development of typical social media platforms and applications, a wide range of emerging social media has been created and developed. A good example is the anonymous social media. At the beginning of 2014, an application named “Secret” emerged and quickly became popular in the U.S. “Secret” opened a new chapter of anonymous social media. Then, in China, several similar applications such as “Wumi”, “Wuya” and “Hehe” was developed to compete with “Secret.” Shortly after this development, “Secret” entered the Chinese market, but the company was shut down after only one year.

When consumers started discussing that anonymous social media’s heyday was gone, a mobile application emerged and convinced them that they were wrong. In June of 2018, an unknown team created and developed Yiguan, an application that received three awards from two application stores within three months. In addition, after the launch of its beta test, Yiguan was so popular among students, youngsters and even adults that it was the trendiest topic on social media. This popular anonymous social media application allows users to express their thoughts and feelings without any fixed personal account.

Compared to other anonymous social media, Yiguan is neither proximity-based nor tie-based. The function of Yiguan does not relate to the location or existing social networks.
Users on this platform can be completely anonymous. By being completely anonymous, users will not have personal profiles and home pages. In addition, each time users post a message or comment, they can change their pseudonym. Yiguan is more like an early online forum compared to other anonymous mobile applications. Once users post a message on Yiguan, it will be immediately delivered to the list of each topic.

On traditional social media such as Facebook and Twitter, users need to construct and maintain their own personal characters by selectively presenting themselves. By continuous impression management, users of traditional social media can create self-satisfied personal image, which is the image that people present to others. However, on anonymous social media such as Yiguan, users do not have fixed and stable personal characters and personal images. In fact, they do not need to construct and maintain their personal characters and personal images anymore. Yiguan makes it possible for its users to avoid self-promotion, which people usually do on traditional social media to provide an edited and better version of themselves. With the help of anonymity, users can express their dissatisfaction and challenges. Also notable is that users can eliminate the constraints, and return to their true personality.

This thesis is based on empirical qualitative research. An audience analysis will be conducted on Yiguan users. More specifically, this research will explore what users do on Yiguan and how they utilize the space on this platform. This paper will also identify the activities of users on Yiguan and explore the characteristics of users’ activities. Combining the critical theories from Mead (1934), Goffman (1959) and Walther (1996), this thesis aims to provide insights into Yiguan users.

1.2 Research questions

Two detailed research questions (RQ) are formulated as follows:

RQ 1: What are the activities of users on Yiguan?
RQ 2: What are the characteristics of users’ activities on Yiguan?

The first research question aims to explore how Yiguan users use the space of this social media and what users do on Yiguan. The findings will be specifically displayed in the analysis section (chapter 6). The objective of the second research question is to investigate the specific characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan. The thesis will discuss users’ behaviors on Yiguan. To answer the two questions, this research will first review previous studies on anonymity studies, social network and social media, online self-presentation and social media interactions. Then, a qualitative method — semi-structured in-depth interview — will be employed to examine the characteristic of users’ self-presentation and interactions based on Mead’s (1934) theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy and Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal interaction.

1.3 Relevance and contribution

This study is academically relevant and important for four reasons. The most reason is that Yiguan is an anonymous social media, which lacks adequate academic discussions and examinations in the field of media studies. Many researchers have conducted research on anonymous social media and gain considerable achievements (Black et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2016; Sharon & John, 2018; Wang et al., 2014). The second reason is that in sociology studies, Goffman (1959) thinks everyone is an actor who performs an act to others. He also points out that people’s performance to others is others based on their cultural values, norms and beliefs (Goffman, 1959). Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy is an important approach that offers insights into human interactions and societal construction. The third reason is that in psychology studies, Mead (1934) thinks that people’s construction of self is a process of taking the role of others. Mead’s theoretical framework can provide a profound understanding of how people should understand themselves and their environment. The last reason is that in communication studies, Walther (1996) developed a model of behavioral confirmation. His works
provide insight into the computer-mediated communication and connection with people’s behaviors. Therefore, this study is multi-disciplinary research that has relevance in four different fields.

This study also aims to contribute to the field of media and communication studies. There are four main contributions. First, this study provides more information about the characteristics of users’ activities on anonymous social media, particularly on Yiguan. Second, this research adds a new and updated empirical case study to the field of media and communication studies. Third, this thesis offers a creative and critical perspective to the theory of symbolic interaction and dramaturgy in order to discuss users’ behaviors on an anonymous social media platform. Lastly, this study contributes to a better understanding of anonymous social media and users’ behaviors on social media platforms.

1.4 Thesis structure

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of anonymous social media, particularly Yiguan. Chapter 3 explores the literature on anonymous social media and identifies the research gap. The theoretical framework of this thesis is introduced in Chapter 4. This chapter includes a description of Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, Goffman’s dramaturgy and Walther’s hyperpersonal interaction. Chapter 5 describes the methodology used in this thesis to collect and analyze data, including the ethics and limitations of this study. Chapter 6 illustrates the analysis of the data collected based on the 11 in-depth interviews. This chapter answers all the research questions of this thesis and examines the characteristics of users’ self-presentation and interaction. As well as the limitations and recommendations of this study, the conclusion of this thesis is drawn in Chapter 7.
2. Background

2.1 Background of Anonymous social media

With the rapid development of the Internet and social networks, today people can socialize with others without the limitation of time and space. According to the 42nd Report on Internet development in China, the number of Chinese social media users in 2018 has reached 756 million, which is 94.3 percent of the number of Chinese netizens. Social media, which are gradually changing people’s lives, have not only become indispensable tools for communication but also shaped a new lifestyle in the digital era.

While traditional social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, online users are increasingly concerned about their privacy. More worrying is the fact that emerging applications such as Secret, Snapchat, Whisper and Yik Yak have different privacy policies that have gained acceptance among millions of users worldwide (Black et al., 2015). Those applications increasingly feature privacy or anonymity as paramount characteristics (Black et al., 2015). For example, Snapchat focuses on privacy, thereby allowing users to send photos or videos to other Snapchat users. This platform also dictates the exact duration a recipient can view this content (between 1 and 10 seconds) (Black et al., 2015). Secret, another emerging application, also focuses on anonymity; it allows users to post messages, pictures, and other content without the potential fear of retaliation or retribution (Black et al., 2015). Despite those applications’ differences, all social media platforms are trying to achieve one goal: encourage users to speak freely and honestly (Sharon & John, 2018). On traditional social networks, users need to continue building and maintaining personal characters to create a self-satisfied personal image, while users of anonymous social media are much more relaxed and open-minded (Ma, 2016). Social media that provide anonymity allow users to escape from the humdrum of everyday life. Anonymity also enables users to express their dissatisfaction and challenges (Ma, 2016).

Some researchers have pointed out two hybrid models of anonymity among social
media platforms: proximity-based and tie-based anonymity (Sharon & John, 2018). Proximity-based anonymity includes services based on geographical proximity. With proximity-based anonymity, the identity of users is verified with GPS on their mobile phones. In this model, users’ posts will be delivered within a certain proximity (Sharon & John, 2018). Whisper and Yik Yak use the proximity-based model. Tie-based anonymity, on the other hand, includes services that relate to pre-existing digital ties between users. Such services are usually drawn from social network sites or mobile phone contacts (Sharon & John, 2018). In this model, messages will be delivered to users that are already in one’s social networks (Sharon & John, 2018). Secret uses the tie-based model.

However, some pundits have expressed that anonymous social media may easily breed and lead to cyber violence and false information (Ma, 2016). Relying on the protection of anonymity, some users post unfavorable contents such as bullying, fake news, pornography and vulgarity on anonymous social media (Ma, 2016). Some scholars have even criticized anonymous social media platforms, lamenting that they limit accountability, transparency, and openness on the Internet (Ma, 2016).

2.2 Background and Description of Yiguan

Literally translated as One Can, Yiguan is a popular Chinese mobile application, especially among students and youngsters. Yiguan, as an anonymous social media, enables users to communicate and socialize with others anonymously without fixed personal account.

Compared to other anonymous social media, Yiguan has two unique features. The first feature is that the identity of Yiguan users can be completely anonymous. Totally different from tie-based anonymous applications such as Secret and Whisper, Yiguan does not allow users to have personal profile home pages. Each time users post a message or comment on the platform, they can change their pseudonym. The second
feature is that the service of Yiguan is neither tie-based anonymity nor proximity-based anonymity. Yiguan operates like an early online forum compared to other anonymous mobile applications. Once users post a message on Yiguan, the message will immediately be delivered to the list of each topic. The message that draws more active interactions will become the popular “can.”

Furthermore, Yiguan has four major themes of sections: emotion, socializing, hobbies, and life. A total of 53 topics can be found in those themes. Among them, the theme of socializing has the largest number of topics, followed by the theme of emotion. The number of topics under the theme of life is the least, however. Yiguan prohibits users to post content that is not related to the subject of the topic. When users post a message on Yiguan, they should first confirm that the content of the message matches the topic which they selected. If users cannot determine the category of the posted message, they can generally post the message in the topic of “this moment,” which can be found under the theme of life.

In addition to simply posting text or images, Yiguan also has functions of voting and chat matching. The function of voting enables every message to be turned to a small survey, thereby allowing users to customize the survey’s subject and options. Besides, the function of chat matching highlights the sociability of Yiguan. The function of chat matching allows users to post introductions of themselves in short text before beginning a 30-minute chat.
It is also important to note the association between Yiguan and “social phobia.” On the download interface of Yiguan on App Store, “customized for social phobia” is shown in the most prominent position. Yiguan describes it as a social medium which helps people “resonates with strangers of the same mood.” Yiguan hopes that users may no longer need to “perform as a profound adult.”

In sum, Yiguan is a completely anonymous social media application. This platform adopts neither tie-based anonymity nor proximity-based anonymity. Yiguan requires users to select the corresponding topic before publishing messages. The platform aims to allow more users to benefit from the protection of anonymity. It also hopes that users could take off their masks from everyday life and return to the true self.
3. Literature Review

To better understand user’s activities on Yiguan, it is essential to have an overview of previous studies. This chapter will start by reviewing the anonymity study since it is an important topic to study on anonymous social media. Next, works of literature focusing on online social networks and social media will be presented. This section mainly aims to explain what is social media and how can we call Yiguan as social media. Then, we move to previous studies which combine the research of self-presentation and social media. Finally, studies of interactions on social media will be introduced. After a systematic review, the research gap in this field will be identified.

3.1 Anonymity Study

The concept of anonymity was firstly introduced from the field of sociology. Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, firstly conducts related research. He indicates that different types of interaction patterns will emerge in our daily life (Popenoe, 1991). With the difference of degree and experience of personal contact, these types of interaction will gradually move from the situation of face-to-face interaction to the situation of anonymous interaction. The two sides of the interaction do not have a deep understanding of each other, so they have anonymity (Popenoe, 1991). Necessarily rooted in interaction, anonymity is therefore of particular interest to media scholars (Sharon & John, 2018). When it comes to the digital era, the booming development of internet assembles more attention on anonymity. Sharon and John (2018) have stated in their article that “mediated by the Internet, with its text-based conversation rooms and discussion boards without strict identification policies, online anonymity became a widely available form of communication” (p.4179).

There is a long-lasting debate about whether anonymity is good or bad for social interaction. Some believe anonymity enable people to become more altruistic and more willing to help others. Researchers who indicate anonymity is good usually highlight the impact of anonymity on democracy and grassroots political actions. Pinsonneault
and Heppel (1997) state that anonymity is a fundamental concept in communication study. Postmes and Lea (2000) believe that anonymity is a crucial tool. McLeod (1997) believes that anonymity is a cardinal benefit. There are also many kinds of research show that anonymity could mitigate status difference, liberates team members from a fear of retribution and make it easier for group members to resist group pressure (Rains, 2007).

However, anonymity may also lead to many problems (Lindgren, 2017; Zimbardo, 2007). First of all, anonymity can remove personal responsibility and generates a perceived loss of individuality (Lindgren, 2017). Zimbardo (2007) reports in his famous Stanford prison experiment that anonymity in groups can lead to de-individuation. People can be impulsive, blatantly aggressive and even sadistic towards one another. Besides, anonymity in digital media may act as a significant course of hate speech, racism, sexism, etc. (Lindgren, 2018).

Despite the never-ending debate of anonymity, some researchers pay attention to the essence of anonymity (Huang, 2000; Ma, 2016). Some researchers associate anonymity with role theory (Huang, 2000). This perspective focus on the characteristic of self-presentation and role performance to understand what is anonymity (Ma, 2016). Huang (2000) states that real anonymity means different users utilize one code name to communicate with one another. Meanwhile, one user will also have different code names. In the process of communicate with others, those code name gradually has its identification (Huang, 2000). Thus, we could name this process as anonymity. This perspective regards anonymity as a manner of self-presentation. Though anonymity makes people perform differently with everyday life, it does not mean anonymity equal to fiction or falsity (Huang, 2000).

Some researchers have also discussed if the anonymity exists or not. Jin (2006) argues in his article Fading Online Anonymity that, because the boundary between the virtual online world and reality, online anonymity is kept fading away.
3.2 Online Social Networks and Social Media

Lindgren (2017) illustrates clearly in his book Digital Media and Society what is online community and what are the difference between the online community and social networks. He states that “groups of individuals that interact through the internet and social media, situated around shared interests, and in which the sense of unity and support is strong, have been called online communities” (2017, p. 86). Unlike social networks, which are more fragmented, open and partial, online communities are more closed, bounded, and embedded with a significant number of members knowing each other relatively closely (Lindgren, 2017).

Because of the coming of web 2.0 and the arrival of social network sites and microblogs such as Facebook and Twitter, the changing from the online community to social networks is inevitable (Lindgren, 2017). The definition of the online community is hard to maintain in today’s dynamic media landscape (Lindgren, 2017). Lindgren points out that “in today’s digital society, people tend to relate to many fragmented social networks, rather than being embedded in clearly delimited social groups” (p. 95).

Rainie and Wellman (2012) discuss the relationship between individual and social network. They point out that a social network can be generated by a set of entities, including individuals and organizations (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Those entities usually have some form of exchange such as information, friendship or ideas (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Another concept which is quite similar to social networks is social media, which has a deep association with the emergence of web 2.0 (Lindgren, 2017; Fuchs, 2014). Michael Mandiberg indicates that the notion of ‘social media’ has been associated with multiple concepts: “the corporate media favorite ‘user-generated content’, Henry Jenkin’s media-industries-focused ‘convergence culture’, Jay Rosen’s ‘the people
formerly known as the audience’, the politically infused ‘participatory media’, Yochai Benkler’s process-oriented ‘peer-production’, and Tim O’Reilly’s computer-programming-oriented ‘Web 2.0”’ (Mandiberg, 2012, p. 2)

Many researchers have defined social media in different ways (Shirky, 2008; Van Dijck, 2013; Lovink, 2011; Fuchs, 2014). Shirky (2008) argues that social media and social software are tools that “increase our ability to share to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organizations.” Van Dijck (2013) points that “the very word ‘social associated with media implies that platforms are user-centered and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasizes human collaboration.” He argues that social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of human networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value (Van Dijck, 2013). Lovink (2011) indicates that social media is a shift from HTML-based linking practice of the open web to liking and recommendation, which happen inside closed systems. Social media is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text (Lovink, 2011).

3.3 Online Self-presentation on Social Media

Self-presentation can trace back to Erving Goffman’s (1959) The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Goffman indicates that people functioned as performers, expressing their identity through verbal and non-verbal messages with a goal to display the most credible image to audiences (others) (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.343). Self-presentation tends to be goal-driven, thus, as individuals consider how to self-present, they balance both individual goals and the “self” that they perceive the audience desires (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.343). Besides, Goffman considers self-presentation to consist of both front stage and backstage performances. With frontstage performances, one is typically very guarded and cautious of the “self” that they are
presenting, whereas with backstage performances, one is generally less scripted and perhaps less filtered with the “self” that is presented (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.343). Goffman (1959) noted that one’s self-presentation is a continual process of a complex negotiation between these two positions, each of which may contain a multitude of presentation strategies that a person seeks to manage through a revolving process of interpreting audiences, goals, and contexts (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.344).

After entering the digital era, social media make it possible for people to have various selfhood on different digital platforms. Hearn (2017) makes verified research on self-presentation, identity management, and selfhood in the age of big data. In order to answer questions that: what new styles of selfhood and self-presentation, ideas about our interiority, forms of social status, and arbiters of “authenticity” are being generated, propagated, and authorized in the wake of big data and the rise of affective capitalism, he posits a new “ideal type” of selfhood for the big data age (Hearn, 2017, p. 62). In his article, he takes up the issues of selfhood and self-presentation in the era of affective capitalism by first tracing some “ideal types” of selfhood posited by a variety of postwar critics, and then briefly describing the contemporary political economic context within which current forms of self-presentation are generated, defined, and circulated (Hearn, 2017, p. 63). It then examines what many might consider a common example of these processes—the Twitter verification checkmark (Hearn, 2017, p. 63). The article figures the verification checkmark as both an affective lure that summons and incentivizes specific styles of self-presentation, and a portal through which we can follow capitalist logic as they work to condition and, ultimately, subsume the impact and significance of the millions of forms of self-presentation generated online daily (Hearn, 2017, p. 63). Finally, Hearn brings out of a concept of “anticipatory, speculative self,” which move from the “flexible personality” of the late 1990s and the “self-brander” of the 2000s.

Much of literature of self-presentation is focused on interpersonal contexts such as dating and friendship. Chan (2016, p. 40) conducts cross-cultural research on how men
who have sex with men (MSM) presented themselves on Jack’d a dating app tailored to this population. This study examines and compares 204 profile from the United States and 204 profiles from China, demonstrating the value of examining online self-presentation of MSM to understand sociocultural differences between the United States and China regarding homosexuality. The results show that Chinese MSM was less likely to show their faces on Jack’d than American MSM because of the stronger stigma of homosexuality in China (Chan, 2016, p. 40). Wotipka and High (2016) conduct researches on the condition of self-presentation on online dating profiles. This study examined the presence of selective self-presentation (SSP) and warranting content as predictors of viewers’ impressions and intentions to act on dating profiles (Wotipka and High, 2016, p. 281). A national sample of online daters provided their impressions and intended outcomes after viewing manipulated dating profiles. Results indicate that high levels of SSP decrease intentions to act on a dating profile because users find these profiles to be less socially attractive, whereas profiles with high warranting value increase positive outcomes by eliciting trust (Wotipka and High, 2016, p. 281). These findings are similar with prior research that suggests strong correlations among social attraction, trust, and relational benefits in face-to-face interactions (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Rempel et al., 1985; Wieselquist et al., 1999).

There are many works of literature which focus on the impression management on social media platforms. Smith and Sanderson (2015, p.342) conduct a study which examines the Instagram feeds of 27 professional athletes to determine how athletes are using the visual social media site for self-presentation. Using Goffman’s (1959, 1979) work to guide the analysis, this study was an examination of how athletes engaged in self-presentation using Instagram, and the gender differences that emerged from their self-presentation behaviors (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.342). Previous research has found gender differences in self-presentation behaviors online; this research sought to expand on the literature regarding the self-presentation of athletes, specifically focusing on a visual social media medium (Smith and Sanderson, 2015, p.342). Dmitrow-Devold (2017) studies on how teenage girls in the mainstream blogging community perform
selves in their blogs over time. This article mostly draws solely on analyses of online artifacts and lack a temporal perspective, while studies of girls’ self-presentations online abound (Dmitrow-Devold, 2017, p. 1). This investigation has employed a longitudinal design combining in-depth interviews with ethnographic content analyses of blogs and has analyzed girls’ online-based performances of self as integral to their offline experiences framed by the wider cultural context and gendered discourses (Dmitrow-Devold, 2017, p. 1). This approach is fruitful because it acknowledges girls’ changing experiences across time and contexts, thus making possible a contribution to the theorization of identity as performed across the online and the offline settings and interactions in an ongoing process (Dmitrow-Devold, 2017, p. 1). What is more, a number of studies have found that impression management is also utilized concerning political communication. Hayes et al. (2015, p. 549) report that Facebook users’ management behaviors related to their—and their friends’—political communication via social media. Results indicated that Facebook users are not generally engaging in the strategic management of political disclosures or the political content to which they are exposed (Hayes et al., 2015, p. 549). However, as network sizes increase, participants engage in more disclosure behaviors and make more considerable efforts to manage content exposure (Hayes et al., 2015, p. 549). Additionally, participants with strong political beliefs engage in more Facebook management behaviors, possibly indicating an effort to limit cognitive dissonance (Hayes et al., 2015, p. 549).

3.4 Social Media Interaction

Communication on social media is firstly considered by most researchers when they talk about social media interaction. Sánchez-Villar (2019) studies on political communication via social media. Following a brief framing of the background analysis, the work considers the role of blogs as a communication tool, focusing fundamentally on the research questions which provide a more in-depth insight into how this tool has managed to change the traditional media landscape (Sánchez-Villar, 2019, p. 39). Subsequently, the work examines the particular nature of blogs and the implications of
their application within the political context (Sánchez-Villar, 2019, p. 39). Finally, the analysis garnered in the article provides a point of departure for the final section, which will offer a synthesis and series of conclusions on the relationship that exists between blogs and journalistic roles today (Sánchez-Villar, 2019, p. 39). Mergel (2013)

There is literature that shows social media is increasingly being used in crises and disasters as an alternative form of communication. Finau et al. (2018) present an analysis of how social media was used during Tropical Cyclone Winston, the strongest recorded tropical storm that left a wake of destruction and devastation in Fiji during February 2016. They note that social media use in crisis communication varies according to the context, the disaster and the maturity of social media use (Finau et al., 2018). The article finds that people’s behaviors are more or less influenced by crisis communication on social media in different stages of Cyclone.

In fact, there are many works of literature which indicate correlations between interactions on social media and the change of people’s behaviors. Fischer and Reuber (2010) write an article about how can interactions on Twitter affect effectual thinking and behaviors. They use an inductive, theory-building methodology to develop propositions regarding how effectuation processes are impacted when entrepreneurs adopt Twitter (Fischer and Reuber, 2010, p.1). They posit that Twitter-based interaction can trigger effectual cognitions, but that high levels of interaction via this medium can lead to effectual churn (Fischer and Reuber, 2010, p.1). They also posit that there is one factor, perceived time affordability, that predicts the level of social interaction in which an entrepreneur engages via Twitter (Fischer and Reuber, 2010, p.1). Further, they propose two factors that moderate the consequences of social interaction through Twitter (Fischer and Reuber, 2010, p.1). These factors are community orientation and community norm adherence.

Except for the change of people’s behavior, there is an article which explores the influence of social media interaction on people well-being. Booker et al. (2018)
research Gender differences in the associations between age trends of social media interaction and well-being among 10-15 year old's teenagers in the UK. Their article indicates gender differences in the relationship between interacting on social media and well-being (Booker et al., 2018, p.1). There were significant correlations between interacting on social media and well-being intercepts and between social media interaction and well-being slopes among females (Booker et al., 2018, p.1). Additionally, higher social media interaction at age ten was associated with declines in well-being after that for females, but not for males (Booker et al., 2018, p.1).

Since anonymous social media are more and more popular recently, literature can be found explicitly discussing interactions on anonymous social media. Sharon and John (2018) publish an article which focuses on the perceptions and practices of anonymous communication with friends enabled by tie-based anonymous apps. The article shows that Secret, an anonymous social media application, was not only based on pre-existing social networks but also drew on the network as a structure of thought (Sharon and John, 2018, p.4177). The concept of networked anonymity is introduced to account for the ways that anonymous actors imagine one another as “someone,” rather than as an unknown “anyone.” (Sharon and John, 2018, p.4177)

Similarly, Kang et al. (2016) attempt to study on why and how people use anonymous apps, their perceptions of their audience and interactions on the apps, and how these apps compare with other online social communities. They argue that People share various types of content that range from deep confessions and secrets to lighthearted jokes and momentary feelings on anonymous social media (Kang et al., 2016, p. 359). Besides, an essential driver for participation and posting is to get social validation from others, even though they are anonymous strangers (Kang et al., 2016, p. 359). They also find that participants believe these anonymous apps allow more honesty, openness, and diversity of opinion that they can find elsewhere (Kang et al., 2016, p. 359). Their results provide implications for how anonymity in mobile apps can encourage expressiveness and interaction among users (Kang et al., 2016, p. 359).
3.5 Current progress and research gap

By reviewing the previous research, it can be found that the concepts of self-presentation and interaction are largely affected by the development of social media. Self-presentation and impression management on social media is a hot topic in the field of media and communication study. It is acknowledged that social media and anonymity make it possible for people to have various type of self-presentation. Most of the researches focus on the ways that how can people manage their impression. These researches list the probable self-presentation on common social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Researches explore the presence of self-presentation in relation to sensitive and interpersonal context. Many scholars have frequently examined online dating applications. However, there is a lack of more in-depth investigation on the self-presentation on anonymous social media. Since anonymous social media is becoming more and more popular, studies which explore both themes of self-presentation and anonymous social media should be conducted as fast as possible.

Interaction on social media consists of a huge number of studies. These studies come from a different field. Communication through social media is a theme which will be involved in many kinds of literature. There are many researches that highlight the influence of social media interactions on people’s behaviors. Some scholars have also examined interactions on anonymous social media. However, although these studies provide an overview of different interactions on social media platforms, they do not answer a specific inquiry of what is the characteristic of activities on anonymous social media. Thus, this thesis wishes to fill in the existing research gap to research on the character of self-presentation and interaction on Yiguan and the anonymous social media.
4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive review of theories and concepts relating to self-presentation and online interaction. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, the theory of symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy will be detailly illustrated. I'll apply the classic frameworks conceived by sociologist Mead and Blumer to describe what is symbolic interactionism and what are the core principles of it, Important concept in symbolic interactionist research, including looking-glass self and generalized other will be introduced. Next, Goffman's dramaturgy theory, which contains Goffman's concept of performance and stage will act as a key concept of self-presentation. After finishing the first part, Walther's model of hyperpersonal interaction in computer-mediated communication will be adapted for analyzing the online interaction in social media.

4.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a framework which can help us to have a better understanding of how individuals interact with one another to create symbolic worlds and in return, how the worlds shape individuals' behaviors. George Herbert Mead first conceived symbolic interactionism in the book *Mind, Self and Society*, which highlights the most important three concepts in the research of symbolic interactionism. According to Mead, 'mind' can be regarded as an ability which an individual can use symbols to create meanings for the world around the individual (Brewster, 2013). Those symbols refer to language and gestures a person uses in anticipation of the way others will respond (Griffin, 2015). 'Self' can be regarded as an ability which an individual can reflect on the way that the individual is perceived by others. Moreover, 'society' can be regarded as a place where all of these interactions are taking place (Brewster, 2013). In a word, Mead and his book describe how language is essential for these three critical human characteristics to develop. Without symbolic interaction, humanity as we know it wouldn't exist (Griffin, 2015).
4.1.1 Three Core Principles

Based on Mead's research and principle, Herbert Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism and generalized the essence of symbolic interactionism (Griffin, 2015; Popenoe, 1991). He argues that symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises (Blumer, 1969). The first premise is that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p.2). According to Blumer, such things "include everything that the human being may note in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as friends or enemies and etc." (Blumer, 1969) This premise can also be summarized as one principle of symbolic interactionism: meaning. Some researchers state that this principle explains the process of the construction of social reality (Griffin, 2015).

The second premise is that "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows" (Blumer, 1969, p.3). This premise can also be summarized as one principle in symbolic interactionism: language. It's the source of the meaning (Griffin, 2015). In other words, the meaning is not inherent in objects. Meaning is not pre-existent in a state of nature. It is negotiated through the use of language (Griffin, 2015). "It's only by talking with others—symbolic interaction—that we come to ascribe that meaning and develop a universe of discourse" (Griffin, 2015, p. 56).

Finally, the third premise of symbolic interactionism is that "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer, 1969, p.5). This premise can also be summarized as one principle of symbolic interactionism: thinking. Thinking is also described as an inner conversation by some symbolic interactionists. Mead called that inner conversation minding, which can be regarded as a reflective delay while we mentally rehearse our next move, test alternatives, anticipate others' reactions (Mead, 1934). However, according to Mead, language is a necessary condition for thinking. He
points out that we naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out the meaning of a difficult situation, but we need language first (Mead, 1934).

4.1.2 Looking-glass Self

After the discussion of several premises and principles of symbolic interactionism, we move to another core concept, the looking-glass self.

Different from other sociologists, Mead dismissed the idea that we get the images of who we are through introspection. Instead, Mead believes that we paint our self-portrait with brush strokes that come from taking the role of others (Mead, 1934). That is, we get the images of whom we are through imagining how we look to another person. Researchers of symbolic interactionism name this image the looking-glass self. They indicate that the looking-glass self is socially constructed (Griffin, 2015).

Language plays an essential role in the process of construction of self. Researchers believe that self is a function of language since there would not be 'self' without talk (Griffin, 2015). People are not born with senses of self. Instead, the concept of self arises in interactions with others. Individuals can only experience him or herself in relation to others (Griffin, 2015).

However, Mead extends the concept of self, describing the self is an ongoing process combining the 'I' and 'me' (Mead, 1934). Griffin (2015) points that "the 'I' is the spontaneous, driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self", while the "me" is "viewed as an object—the image of self seen in the looking glass of other people's reactions" (p. 60). He states that "trying to examine the 'I' part of the self is like viewing a snowflake through a lighted microscope. The very act causes it to vanish. Put another way, you can never know your 'I,' because once it is known it becomes your' me.'" (Griffin, 2015, p. 60)

4.1.3 Society and Generalized Other
Except for looking-glass self, Mead also describes his concept of generalized other. In short, the generalized other is an organized set of information that the individual carries in her or his head about what the general expectation and attitudes of the social group are (Griffin, 2015). People need more consideration of the concept of generalized other whenever we try to figure out how to behave or how to evaluate our behavior in a social situation (Griffin, 2015). We always assign meaning to ourselves and our actions by taking the position of the generalized other (Griffin, 2015).

There are two different illustrations of generalized other since Mead doesn't explain it clearly in Mind, Self and Society. First, we can regard the generalized other as an overarching looking-glass self that we put together from the reflections we see in everyone we know (Griffin, 2015). Second, generalized other can also be regarded as the institutional expectations, rules of the game, or accepted practices within society that influence every conversation that takes place in people's minds (Griffin, 2015). According to Griffin (2015), either way, the generalized other shapes how we think and interact within the community.

To summarize, there is no 'me' at birth. The 'me' is shaped through continual symbolic interactions, such as interaction with family, with playmates and in social institutions. Griffin (2015) summarizes that, as the generalized other develops, this imaginary composite person becomes the conversational partner in an ongoing mental dialogue. In this way, kids participate in their own socialization. The child gradually acquires the roles of those in the surrounding community.

4.2 Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy, which is introduced based on the theory of symbolic interactionism, was first adapted to the sociology from the theater by Erving Goffman in his book The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life. In this book, social psychologist Goffman use
great metaphor to describe people's interaction with one another. Goffman's theory of dramaturgy is built on two core concepts: performance and region.

4.2.1 Performance
According to Goffman (1959), everyone is the actors, and we are all performing to others. There are several elements which could influence people's interactions. He argues that the elements of human interactions depend on time, place and audience (Goffman, 1959). He points out that we all perform ourselves to others based on our culture values, norms and believes (Goffman, 1959). This kind of careful performance aims to gain acceptance from the audience (Goffman, 1959). Performances can be disrupted, as well. When the performances have disruption, the actors will be aware of this situation. But most of the performances are successful. Once the actor succeeds, the audience will view the actor as he or she wants to be viewed (Goffman, 1959). According to Goffman, this kind of skills for better performance is impression management. He describes the presentation of the self in any setting as a performance designed to achieve a particular impression. As he states in his book, "the performance of an individual accentuates certain matters and conceals others." (Goffman, 1959, p.67) As we present ourselves in everyday situations, we reveal information to others both consciously and unconsciously. Our performance includes how we dress (in theatrical terms, our costume), the objects we carry (props), and our tone of voice and gestures (our demeanor) (Macionis, 2011, p. 132). In addition, we vary our performance according to where we are (the set) (Macionis, 2011, p. 132). Macionis (2011) argues that there is a performance of nonverbal communication, communication using body movements, gestures, and facial expressions rather than speech (Macionis, 2011, p. 132). People use many parts of the body to convey information through body language (Macionis, 2011, p. 132). Facial expressions are the most important type of body language. Eye contact is another key element of nonverbal communication. Similarly, Wang (2001) has made a conclusion based on Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on performance. He concludes that there is two way for performance, which is conscious performance (intentional action) and unconscious performance (nonverbal
In addition, Macionis (2011) notes that gender does affect performance. That's because men typically have more significant social power than women. Gender differences involve demeanor, use of space, and smiling, staring, and touching (Macionis, 2011, p. 143). Because women generally occupy positions of lesser power, demeanor is a gender issue as well (Macionis, 2011, p. 133). Women, then, learn to craft their personal performances more carefully than men and to defer to men more often in everyday interaction (Macionis, 2011, p. 143). Power plays a crucial role in relation to space; the more power you have, the more space you use (Macionis, 2011, p. 133). Men typically command more space than women. Staring and touching is generally done by men to women (Macionis, 2011, p. 143). Smiling, as a way to please another, is more commonly done by women (Macionis, 2011, p. 143).

4.2.2 Region

Within Goffman's so-called dramaturgical perspective on interaction, he also illustrates what the stage of people's interactions is. According to Goffman (1959), the stage can be divided into three parts: front region, back region and outside (off-stage).

Goffman (1959) defined front as "that part of an individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unconsciously employed by the individual during his performance." (p.22) The front region, then, includes anything observed by the audience while the actor is on front stage which makes for successful performance (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p.
The front region is the place where the actor is seriously playing out the script of impression management (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). In the front region, the actor avoids anything that is inappropriate according to the script (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). What happens in the front region is an attempt to manipulate the audience (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222).

The front is the standard element of social performance. It can be divided into several components. First is the setting. The setting may be scenery, props or location. The setting is the scenic, physical parts of expressive equipment, associated with certain spatial location (Goffman, 1959). Expect for setting, there are also some components such as sex, race, etc. may make an influence on front. These can be distinguished into two concepts: appearance and manner. According to Goffman, appearance "may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social status", while manner is stimuli "which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation" (1959, p.24). In short, appearance is those aspects of individuals that tell of one's social statuses. The manner is those aspects of communication that tell of others the type of interaction roles which performers expect to play in a certain situation. All in all, the environment of the interaction affects what we do and how we do it (Lindgren, 2017).

Back region is the opposite concept of the front. Goffman (1959, p.24) definite backstage as a place where "the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines and step out of character." Lindgren (2017) describe backstage as "a backstage dimension where we can get rid of our assumed or ascribed roles or identities" (p.38). Different from the front region, the back region, by contrast, is the place closed to and hidden from the audience where the techniques of impression management are practiced (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). Many forms of assistance to the actors are given in the backstage region, for example, adjustment of costumes and prompting (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). Different from the front region, backstage is where the audience will have none possibility to visit and see. Compared
to the front stage, backstage is more private and isolated. It is also a place where the
performer can relax. In a word, backstage is where the actors do not need to engage in
impression management; they can be themselves (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 223).
However, the front and the back region are not stable. Ma (2016) summarizes that the
switch from the front stage and backstage enables people to utilize different tools and
technologies to present various self-images to a diverse audience.

4.3 Hyperpersonal Interaction

Joseph Walther, a researcher of the social and interpersonal dynamics of computer-
mediated communication, introduces a theoretical approach that what he called
hyperpersonal interaction. In short, this notion accounts for why some form of
interaction through digital media sometimes are marked by higher levels of emotional
intensity and self-disclosure than face-to-face interaction (Lindgren, 2017). Walther's
(1996) theoretical approach has four elements, which are the four components of the
communication process: receivers, senders, characteristics of channel and feedback
processes.

The receiver, which Walther firstly takes into consideration, is the first component that
influences hyperpersonal interaction. Walther (1996) compares the computer-mediated
communication (CMC) and face-to-face communication. He finds message receivers
of computer-mediated communication would inflate the perceptions they form about
their partners. That is, the CMC receiver tends to have an idealized perception of their
partners. Walther predicts that, because of the lacking of face-to-face cue and prior
personal knowledge about one's partners, whatever subtle social context cues or
personality cues do appear in CMC take on particularly great value. That's because
CMC partners are engaging in an "overattribution" process, which enables CMC
partners to build stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the
strength of such impressions in light of information – misspellings, typographical errors,
or excessive punctuation – on which they are built (Walther, 1996). This kind of over-
reliance on minimal cues is much easier to be found when participants have no physical exposure to another (Walther, 1996). Walther calls this phenomenon as "deindividuated." He points out that the deindividuated phenomenon becomes more focus for members of particular online social support groups who share similar concerns, expertise, or maladies (Walther, 1996).

When it comes to the CMC sender, Walther adapts Goffman's concept of self-presentation to describe the main feature. The sender tends to optimize their self-presentation. According to Walther (1996), people's selection and deployment of favorable impressions may be enhanced in CMC. CMC participants are better able to plan and had increased the opportunity to self-censor. Besides, with more time on constructing messages and less stress on ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection, and transmission of preferable cues (Walther, 1996).

Walther also discusses two elements that may lead to selected self-presentation in CMC. First is reduced communication cues. In CMC, most of the social information is based on language. It's clear that the absence of one's physical being in CMC has the potential to make more malleable the impression one is able to make (Walther, 1996). Verbal behavior is more subject to our editing and control than nonverbal behaviors. Thus, the first impression is highly manageable in CMC (Walther, 1996). However, Walther also points out that looks, gender, race, and other traits are not never apparent in CMC. Such traits are often revealed through performance rather than appearance (Walther, 1996). Feenberg (1989) observed that,

"Where self-presentation takes the form of the production of personal texts, it is possible to reflect on a choice of tome and language in a way that few can achieve in speech, dress, and gesture. The communicating subject is profoundly modified by the generalization of such highly controlled forms of self-presentation. The "I"
who presents you with the "me-as-text" is not exactly the same "I" who appears in face-to-face encounters." (p. 272)

The second element that influences the selective self-presentation is the asynchronicity of communications (Walther, 1996). That is, conversations in CMC may not happen in real time. Walther conceives the concept of 'conversational relaxation' (Walther, 1996, p. 26). Asynchronous communication in CMC gives users time to be more strategic about what they say, and how, which also enables more refined forms of self-presentation and self-censorship (Lindgren, 2017). Walther points out that asynchronous interaction allows "the user almost unlimited time for editing, composing, sending and receiving messages" (p. 26). He argues that, when communication does not require partners' simultaneous attention, individuals take part in their group's activities at time intervals of their own convenience (Walther, 1996). They may do so when the clock on other activities has stopped. The trade-off between the time of day, length of time, and frequency for participation is much more a matter of individual choice (Walther, 1996).

In addition, asynchronous channels also mean that we don't have to deal with the immediate reaction of those we are interacting with. Psychologist Suler (2004) makes similar research on asynchronous communication. He argues that asynchronous communication makes users disinhibited. According to Suler, the possibility of moving in and out of a conversation and the absence of 'a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others' enables us to feel safer, and to formulate our thoughts more freely (Suler, 2004, p. 323).

The final CMC component is the feedback between sender and receiver. Walther indicates that an intensification loop of 'behavioral confirmation' is magnified in minimal-cue interaction, such as in CMC. When the sender idealizes his or her interaction partner, the receiver will respond to this by further optimizing their self-image, and so on (Lindgren, 2017). That why some communications online with what
ought to be seen as relative strangers might become surprisingly intimate (Lindgren, 2017). Walther (1996) claims that,

"at the level of the sender, CMC partners may select and express communication behaviors that are more stereotypically desirable in achieving their social goals and transmit messages free of the 'noise' that otherwise comes with the unintended appearance or behavior features. At the other end, CMC receivers take in these stylized messages, construct idealized images of their partners and relationships, and, through reciprocation, confirm them. These processes may be further enhanced when the minimal-cue interaction is also asynchronous; freed from communicating in real time, users are released from the pressure to meet." (p. 28-29)

So far, computer-mediated communication seems to be able to make interaction either impersonal, or increasingly hyperpersonal, and possibly anything in between. The reason why Walther concludes about hyperpersonal and digital media doesn't aim to decide which one of these forms of interaction are realized in any given situation (Lindgren, 2017). Rather, he would like to tell us that the internet and social media afford opportunities for people to communicate as they like (Lindgren, 2017).
5. Methodology

This chapter aims to describe the research design of this study and explain the purpose and benefits of the research methodology employed in this research. As the primary research method used in this study, qualitative research will be first introduced explicitly. This section will also explain in detail why in-depth interviews will be employed. Next, the research design process will be described. After that, this chapter will provide more detailed information about coding and analyses of this research. Lastly, the limitations and ethics of this study will also be discussed at the end of this chapter.

5.1 Why to use the qualitative method

This paper applies one qualitative method – the in-depth interviews – to answer research questions. Brennen (2012) has made a comparative conclusion on qualitative research method and quantitative research method in the area of communication and media. Quantitative research methods deal with statistical data such as measurement and numbers. Applying quantitative research method, researchers usually attempts to isolate specific elements and it uses numbers and numerical correlations within value-free environments to measure and analyze the causal relationships between variables (Brennen, 2012). Quantitative research can be seen as systematic, precise and accurate as it tries to determine validity, reliability, objectivity and truth (Brennen, 2012). In addition, numbers and quantify data can offer the research more authenticity, because numbers are seen as more reliable than thoughts by some people. For some, quantitative research can also be more scientific. As one statistician suggests, some people “worship the statistician as someone who, with the aid of his magical computing machine, can make almost any study ‘scientific’” (Brennen, 2012).

In the contrast, the qualitative method is interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical in nature (Brennen, 2012). Applying qualitative methods, researchers usually use language to understand concepts based on people’s experience (Brennen,
Qualitative research methods give researchers possibilities to create a sense of a larger realm of human relationships (Brennen, 2012). Brennen (2012) points out that qualitative researchers consider alternative notions of knowledge and they understand that reality is socially constructed. They showcase a variety of meanings and truths, and draw on a belief in and support of a researcher’s active role in the research process (Brennen, 2012). In short, compared to quantitative research method, while quantitative research values control, qualitative research values openness and flexibility. The quantitative researcher maintains an objective, detached stance, but the qualitative researcher is considered to be the key instrument involved closely with the data collection and analysis.

Several reasons abound why qualitative research is preferred to quantitative research in this study. One, it is very difficult to collect statistical data of Yiguan not only because it is a new anonymous mobile application but also because of the paucity of numerical data on Yiguan. However, qualitative methods allow easy access to abundant and rich information. Two, to analyze users’ activities on Yiguan and the characteristics of their activities, this thesis needs to adopt an open and flexible attitude to all the information gleaned from participants. Moreover, quantifying all the information into statistical data will be extremely difficult. However, with qualitative research, it is possible to closely observe and deeply understand research participants. Three, many scholars prefer to conduct qualitative research in relation to anonymous social media, online activities, self-presentation, and interactions. With similar research questions, Ma (2013) used questionnaires and interviews to analyze self-presentation and interpersonal communication in anonymous social networking. With similar research background and research object, Sharon and John (2018) carried out an in-depth interview to study Secret users aged 23-46 years old in Israel. Similarly, Kang et al. (2016, p. 361) conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with anonymous communication application users to better understand how and why people use social media apps. In short, findings from the literature indicate that qualitative research is better than quantitative research in terms of gaining more insights into this research topic.
5.2 Why to use the online in-depth interview

In-depth interview is one of the main methods of data collection used in qualitative research (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). It is often described as a form of conversation. Researchers note that method is a conversation with a purpose (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). As such it reproduces a fundamental process through which knowledge about the social world is constructed in normal human interaction (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). However, there are some obvious differences between normal conversation and in-depth interviews. The objectives and roles of researchers and participants of in-depth interviews and normal conversations are quite different. In fact, although a good in-depth interview will appear naturalistic, it will bear little resemblance to an everyday conversation (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

Morris (2015) has discussed about the benefits of in-depth interviews. He notes that the interview gives the researcher access to interviewees’ thoughts, reflections, motives, experiences, memories, understandings, interpretations and perceptions of the topic under consideration. It gives the researcher the opportunity to establish why people construct the world in particular ways and think the way they do. The stories of interviewees are a way of knowing. He also talks about the difference between an in-depth interview and other qualitative methods. He notes that although it is possible to get an idea of how people see the world through the use of a survey questionnaire, observation, blogs and secondary sources, the strength of the in-depth interview lies in its ability to create a research space in which the interviewee is able to tell their story and give the researcher a range of insights and thoughts about a particular topic (Morris, 2015). Through in-depth interviews the researcher is able to obtain an understanding of the social reality under consideration and, depending on the circumstances, collect rich data fairly rapidly (Morris, 2015).

In this thesis, the in-depth interview is the main research method used to gather
The interview has two main benefits in this study. One benefit is that it is straightforward. The other benefit is that it provides in-depth answers to the research questions. An in-depth interview, for instance, gives the interviewer the opportunity to understand the views of interviewees. By listening to the stories of the interviewees, the interviewer could learn about their attributes of Yiguan and the pros and cons of using Yiguan. The in-depth interview also supplies a wealth of information to this study. Because Yiguan users are highly concerned about their private data, an in-depth interview will be better than other research methods as trust could be built with research participants during conversations.

Also important is that this study employs online interviews. There are several reasons why the online interview was chosen. The most important reason is that online interviews are cheaper and are not restricted by geographical barriers. Because of the limitation of time and fund, it is difficult for the researcher to recruit enough participants who live in the same city. The participants of this study are distributed across different cities in China. Given that it would be expensive to visit every participant in a limited time, online interview seems to be the best option. A vast majority of Chinese have access to the Internet; hence, online interview will be much easier and more convenient for participants. Also, much effort is invested in making the online interview of this study as effective, comfortable, and friendly as face-to-face interviews. For instance, all the participants are greeted and treated with courtesy before commencing the interviews.

5.3 Research Design

5.3.1 The early stage of research
In the early stage of this study, the interviewer acted as a “lurker” on Yiguan to obtain the primary background and source for later analysis. The interviewer downloaded Yiguan, learned how to use it perfectly, and behaved like a normal user of this application. The interviewer also published new messages, ‘liked’ others messages and
commented on the posts of other users depending on the topic of interest. Besides, from February 1 to February 5, 2019, each day at 8 p.m., the interviewer carefully read all the top-five hottest messages of total 53 topics in Yiguan, paying attention to the contexts and interactions in the messages, especially the pattern of comments and likes. Attention was also paid to how users expressed themselves in those messages, including the associations between users’ pseudonym and the content they published. The most important part of the early stage of this research is the experience of being a lurker acting as the supplement role of the interview. This experience offers a direction and general structure to the interview. With the data gathered from lurking on Yiguan, interview questions are conceived and revised. In short, lurking is an important and necessary experience in the stage of gathering data.

5.3.2 Sample of the participants
Participants were recruited on Yiguan and Weibo, a Chinese Twitter-like social media platform. The kind of participants required for the interview was noted to make the recruitment process seamless. After that, a message was published on Yiguan and Weibo. The message indicated that participants who have used Yiguan for more than one month and who are familiar with all Yiguan functions are needed. Initially, only 15 people showed interest to participate in this study. However, to make this study more scientific, 15 people were selected based on their frequency of using Yiguan and their gender. All the potential participants were categorized, making sure this study included light users, medium users and heavy users. Light users refer to people who have used Yiguan 1 to 5 times a week. Medium users refer to individuals who have accessed Yiguan 6 to 10 times a week. Heavy users are those who have logged into Yiguan more than 11 times a week. Even though more women than men applied for the interview, the number of participants was balanced to ensure the equal number of both male and female participants. However, participants’ occupation and age were not considered as this thesis was not designed to discuss occupation and age factors. Finally, 11 people participated in this study. Among these 11 people, 4 of them were males, while 7 of them were females. Also, 5 participants were students. The age of those 11 participants
ranged from 16 to 27 years’ old.

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<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Heavy User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Medium User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Heavy User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Heavy User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Light User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Medium User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Light User</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Light User</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Before the commencement of the interview, a questionnaire containing 13 interview questions was designed. The questions were divided into three sections. The first section included general questions. In this section, interviewees were asked to discuss their experience using Yiguan. To be more specific, interviewees were invited to discuss how they knew about Yiguan and why they downloaded the app. The second section of the interview questions focused on the use of social media and Yiguan particularly. Interviewees were asked to share their experience using different social media use, especially why they prefer Yiguan to other social media platforms. That is, the interviewer guided the interviewees to compare Yiguan and other social media. The third section of the interview questions focused on the interviewee’s attitude on Yiguan. Interviewees were asked five open questions. All the interviews were conducted via WeChat audio call. Each interview lasted for about 30-45 minutes and was recorded with an iPhone.
When I conduct the interviews, after asking my questions, interviewees were given some time to express their opinions. They were also asked follow-up questions to clarify their response to a particular answer. According to Morris (2015), there is more room for a more detailed discussion.

5.4 Analysis of data

After conducting the online semi-structured in-depth interviews, the audio records are transcribed by me. Because all the transcripts are Chinese, the coding on data is also Chinese.

The analysis of the data follows a ground theory approach. The transcripts are coded by me, using Dedoose software (http://dedoose.com/). Coding proceeded through two stages: open coding and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). First, open coding was applied to identify prominent themes across all interviews and fracturing the raw data into “bricks” of concepts and motifs (Sharon and John, 2018). In this stage, coding requires “thinking outside the box” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 463). It means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 463). In addition, open coding means the idea is not just to take a phrase from “raw” data and use it as a label. Rather, open coding requires searching for one right word or two that best describes conceptually what the researcher believes is indicated by the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 463). I then performed axial coding, conducted affinity diagramming to group categories of concepts. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 548) describe axial coding as “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other”. Thus, I developed a series of themes on each topic: application use, types of posts people made and why, and types of posts they liked and disliked, motivations for using the application, perceptions of the other users of the applications, contrast with other social media and self-presentation on the applications. This stage of analysis is used to define
the main categories and their sub-categories (e.g. “fun,” “boredom,” and “loneliness” were conjoined to a subcategory of “reason why to use Yiguan,” which was subordinated to a higher category of “motivations for using the application”). After this integration of categories, the data were reevaluated, and core categories were identified. This study does not conduct selective coding, which is the next stage of coding procedure applying ground theory.

5.5 Limitations

Although it is believed that the research design can answer the research questions, this thesis still has its limitations. The most important limitation is that Yiguan is an emerging mobile application which is been updated regularly. That is, some functions will be added to or deleted from Yiguan. Those functions may influence users’ activities. This thesis focuses on version 1.5.1 of Yiguan. After all the interviews were completed, Yiguan updated its app to version 2.1.0. The Yiguan of version 2.1.0 includes a rebuilt interface and a range of new functions like “Personal Album,” which could collect messages that users had published before. Old Yiguan users gave this new version of Yiguan a lot of negative reviews. Nonetheless, many new users liked the new version of Yiguan. Yiguan’s update weakened its privacy but enhanced its sociality. As a result, this thesis will only discuss users’ activities before version 2.1.0 of Yiguan. The version 2.1.0 of Yiguan and its subsequent updates will not be considered in this research.

Secondly, because of the limitation of location, this thesis employed online interviews. This interview method allows the interviewer to capture the participants’ subtle expressions and physical movements. Although the interviewees cooperated and answered all the interview questions, some important information that is useful to the research might have been missed due to the particularity of the online interview. In addition, because of time limitation, only 11 Yiguan users were interviewed. For future research, the number of participants can be expanded. The final limitation is the manual coding work. Because this thesis is an independent work, only the researcher participated in the coding process. If this project is a group work research, it is pertinent
that other researchers double-check the coding results and ensure the findings are more objective and reliable.

5.6 Ethics

Brennen (2012) indicates that no matter what methodologies of a thesis, it is crucial that no participant be harmed during the research process. In this thesis, because Yiguan users do not have a fixed personal account and personal profile, all the messages observed are public content and are accessible to everyone. When acting as a lurker on Yiguan, the researcher focused on the research goals. Besides, none of the content observed was recorded or susceptible to any violation of privacy and confidentiality.

Researchers should consider imbalances that may exist in the power relations between respondents and interviewers (Brennen, 2012). This is because they are responsible for framing each research project, introducing issues and topics, and influencing the outline and direction of each interview. Thus, researchers using qualitative in-depth interview should be more sensitive to the use of personal information (Brennen, 2012). As shown in Section 5.3.2, all the participants are anonymous in this study. However, ensuring that all the participants are fully anonymous in this study would be difficult as their families and friends may recognize them through their expressions in the interviews. The data of the participants nonetheless will not only be used to accomplish the objective of this thesis. In addition, all the participants will be notified properly about the goals of this thesis so that they can make informed decisions. Although the interviews are recorded and used mainly for this project, the audio file will not be distributed online to protect respondents from physical and emotional harm.
6. Analysis

This chapter aims to provide answers to the two research questions: What are the activities of users on Yiguan? What are the characteristics of users’ activities on Yiguan? To respond to these two questions, this chapter will present the results of interviews. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of users’ activities on Yiguan. After identifying users’ activities on Yiguan, the next section of this chapter analyzes the characteristics of users’ activities on Yiguan. Lastly, this chapter discusses the gender difference in the self-presentation and interaction on Yiguan.

6.1 An overview of users’ activities on Yiguan

Based on 11 in-depth interviews, all the participants provided a vivid picture of how they use Yiguan. The users’ media use on Yiguan can be categorized into four aspects: publishing new messages, leaving comments, liking content, and sending private messages. According to findings from the in-depth interviews, the themes of the published messages are categorized into four different topics: self-disclosure, online dating, communication and interaction, and others.

The first theme of published messages is self-disclosure, which is the most common message found on Yiguan. Users often write about their own emotions, feelings, thoughts and experience. The second theme of the messages is online dating, which usually includes information about people looking for dating partners. The third theme of messages is communication and interaction. Messages of this theme aim to promote conversations and interactions between users. Finally, messages whose purposes and meanings cannot be understood are categorized in the theme of others.

When users published new content, most of them preferred to publish a particular kind of content. Half of them decided to post messages relating to their own life and experience. Interviewees indicated that when they had strong feelings – whether bad or good emotions – they were likely to post messages on Yiguan.
“Generally, I will post something on Yiguan because I am really happy or unhappy. I mostly talk about my own feelings or experience on Yiguan.” (P3, female)

However, not every single user would like to publish new content. Some of them preferred to browse and read the messages and comments of others. Some interviewees pointed out that compared to publishing messages, they preferred to peruse messages posted by other users.

“I usually browse and read messages of others. I have only posted on Yiguan for about two times. I think Yiguan is a public platform and I don’t want to talk too much about myself online.” (P9, female)

Except for publishing new contents and posting comments, liking and sending private messages are also methods employed by users to approach other users on the platform. Users can interact with one another on Yiguan by using those three strategies. However, some interviewees have not interacted with other users at all. Interviewee P9 pointed out that Yiguan was more like a public diary, where she could express all her feelings and thoughts. She said she had not interacted with others before.

“I rarely interact with other users. For me, Yiguan is like a diary book, but can be access to everyone. I just want to read other’s stories and comments, I don’t want to participate in.” (P9, female)

When participants were asked about their intention of using Yiguan, most of them commented that they were using Yiguan to kill time. However, two interviewees said they used Yiguan to vent and record their emotions.

In addition, talking about the advantages and disadvantages of Yiguan, most interviewees admitted that anonymity could be a double-edged sword. As anonymous social media users, participants acknowledged that anonymity protected their identity when interacting with others. With anonymity, they could feel much freer and safer on Yiguan than on other non-anonymous social media platforms. However, some users
believed that anonymity encouraged vulgar information, fake news and deceptions.

6.1.1 Causes of media use on Yiguan

External causes

The first external cause of using this application is that Yiguan gives its users a relaxed and comfortable environment for expressing themselves. People usually need to play different roles in social life. Compared to social network sites such as Facebook and Weibo, Yiguan and other anonymous social media do not require users to have fixed personal account. This means that users on Yiguan and other anonymous social media can talk more freely. Interviewee P1 commented that he frequently used WeChat (a Chinese messaging app) because all his friends and families communicated on this platform. Although P1 usually posted messages about his life on WeChat, he found that it was becoming increasingly stressful for him to maintain his personal image.

“My families and friends are all using WeChat, so every time I’d like to publish something, I’ll feel a little worried and anxious about whether I should publish it or not. For example, I may feel guilty when I talk about something negative or unpleasant. I may also worry about what my parents think of me, so I may block them when I want to say something out of my character.” (P1, male)

However, users of anonymous social media do not need to worry about such stressful situations. Yiguan users get the chance to cover up the identities and roles they are playing. In other words, it is unnecessary for them to construct and maintain real name personal images. Interviewee P3 noted that her personal image from Yiguan was totally different from the personal image of other social media. She indicated that she would not publish the messages that she posted on Yiguan on other real name social media platforms. For example, unsatisfied with her manager, she decided to vent her anger on Yiguan. However, she did not express her grouse on other real name social media platforms.

“When I was reading messages on Yiguan, what makes me very comfortable is that I can express myself and interact with others freely. I may comment and like other’s
messages based on my interest. I don’t need to maintain any relationship.” (P3, female)

The second external cause of media use is that users can find information which is more diverse and authentic on Yiguan than on other real name social media platforms. In a word, messages and information are more attractive on Yiguan. Because of this, users choose to download this application to express themselves. Interviewee P1 stated that he decided to access Yiguan because the platform could provide him exciting stimulation which he could not find on other social media.

“WeChat and its circle of friends are full of hypocritical and flattering text that I don’t want to see anymore. But, Yiguan is more authentic. I think only on anonymous platforms can I see the real life of common people.” (P1, male)

**Internal causes**

The first internal cause of people’s media use on Yiguan is social needs. Humans are social animals, and they are wired to socialize with others. Social interaction is a means of communication. It is also the foundation of society. Several interviewees pointed out that Yiguan satisfied their social needs. Interviewee P1 stated that Yiguan was like a platform where users could help from others and answer others’ questions. Interviewee P3 posted messages on Yiguan every time she was upset or unhappy with the aim of receiving consolatory messages from other users.

The second internal cause is the desire of prying. It is a natural human instinct for people to pry into other’s privacy. During childhood, people imitate other’s behavior. This makes prying and imitating gradually become the driving force of human growth and development. Su (2002) indicates that the desire of people to pry into others’ affairs can never be eliminated. Most importantly people are naturally curious about negative privacy.

The third internal cause is the need for expression. The need for expression plays an important role in humans’ social life, especially when people are in a relationship with
their significant other. In addition, when a human is influenced by positive or negative emotions, they can make psychological adjustments by expressing their feelings.

6.2 The characteristics of users’ activities on Yiguan

6.2.1 Self-disclosure: the fluidity of character

As mentioned previously, most messages published on Yiguan are about self-disclosure. Focusing on self-disclosure is the top activities of users on Yiguan. Users on Yiguan tend to publish messages of their own feelings, emotions, thoughts and experiences. Two main reasons abound why the content of self-disclosure occupies the dominant position in the information flow. On the one hand, anonymity allows users to have a much safer environment for self-disclosure. At Yiguan, no one knows anything about the identity of users. In fact, a user’s pseudonym can be changed every time before the person publishes messages or posts comments. Moreover, Yiguan allows no fixed personal account and personal homepage, making it impossible for others to trace one user. In short, Yiguan users do not need to construct and maintain their personal images, which are the images that people present to others.

Interviewees P3, P4 and P8 commented that the safer environment on Yiguan contributed to their willingness to talk about themselves. Yiguan provides users enough privacy and confidentiality, thereby encourage users to express their feelings without any fear of retribution or criticism.

“Because Yiguan is an anonymous platform, messages I published are like my own secrets. Every time I’d like to talk about something private, I just change my pseudonym, then nobody can find me. It’s kind of safe you know.” (P3, female)

“When I want to say something negative, I’ll choose Yiguan. Yiguan has a kind of secrecy, with which I can publish and post messages without worries.” (P4, male)

“I feel less stressed when I publish content on Yiguan because Yiguan has no personal homepage. It’s hard for people to guess whom I am based only on the content I have published before. I think Yiguan gives me enough privacy.” (P8, female)
In addition, interviewee P5 indicated that the unacquaintance online encouraged users to be friendlier and sincerer to others.

“I think it’s important that people are so unfamiliar with each other on Yiguan. People don’t know one another, so I think we should be much sincerer to others, we should talk more about ourselves, like our thoughts and feelings.” (P5, male)

On the other hand, Yiguan’s advertising strategy and product positioning encourage users to express their feelings and emotions. One magazine interviewed the product manager of Yiguan. In the interview, the manager asserted that the inspiration for developing Yiguan is to create a place where “social phobia” can talk without pressures or anxiety. “Social phobia” refers to an anxiety disorder characterized by a significant amount of fear in social situations. However, the product manager interpreted this concept as a group of people who wants to express themselves but cannot locate a place to reveal their emotions or find someone with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings.

“I am a kind of “social phobia” who will feel a little anxious to talk with other people. However, I actually have lots of emotions and thoughts which I wish to share with others. I want to create a place where it is totally safe for people like me to express ourselves, and I also believe everyone will need a place like that.” (Product manager)

Furthermore, Yiguan is labeled as “a place you can know me without meeting me” on App Store.

“I think the advertising slogans are attracting more people to share and talk about their own. Those who wish to socialize with others can boldly express themselves through the help of anonymity. They don’t need to worry about whether others like them or not. Even there are people who don’t like them, they can change a new pseudonym and talk with different people. This application gives people chances to express and to make self-disclosures.” (P2, male)
Interviewee P2 also pointed out that when he made self-disclosure online, he might have a fluid character. That is, users on Yiguan can act as differently. The character setting and personal images are not fixed on Yiguan. The character setting refers to the character chosen by people as their identity. The personal image refers to the image which people present to others. This fluidity shows the complexity of people’s performance.

According to interviewee P2, he would present himself selectively to other people because of the anonymity provided by Yiguan. He also declared that Yiguan is a perfect place where he could demonstrate any of his preferred identity.

“I think people can act as any character on Yiguan. You can act as yourselves, you can also act as any other people or character. That is really attractive to me. [...] For example, I may act like a person who is in a different age with me. I actually have worked for years. I can choose to participate in discussions based on my real age, I can also pretend I am still a student. For instance, a boy asks about how can he get along with his roommates on Yiguan. I have lived with roommates as well. I can pretend I am a student and talk to him about how I deal with that problem when I was young. I can also give him advice as a man who has worked for years.” (P2, male)

According to Goffman (1959), Yiguan is full of performance and stages. Every single conversation and publishing can be regarded as a stage of performance. However, unlike the traditional performance which has certain actors and audience, performance on Yiguan is like a group of masked actors performing for some masked audiences. That is, both actors and audiences cannot see each other’s face. Therefore, to interact or communicate with one another, both actors and audiences should speculate whom they are looking at. Based on their speculation, actors and audience will change their masks to make the performance creditable. This process in which actors and audiences continuously change their masks leads to the fluidity of their character setting and personal images.
However, the question is, is the fluidity of character tantamount to deception? It cannot be argued that this process of changing mask makes the self-presentation less authentic. Interviewee P2 mentioned something about authenticity. He noted that the selective presentation of “self” is because “self” is a complicated notion. It can be quite challenging to distinguish all the identities of one person.

“I am not saying that acting as other people is to deceive others. It’s like stepping out of characters. I think anonymity gives me the opportunity to observe how many “me” there is.” (P2, male)

In fact, this characteristic of fluidity reflects the process described by Mead (1934) as the construction of “self.” Mead pointed out that people paint their self-portrait with brush strokes by taking the roles of others (Mead, 1934). People perceive their identity by imagining how they look to others. The images were called looking-glass self by symbolic interactionist. In the case of Yiguan, it will be difficult for people to show a stable and fixed “self” when the person they are looking at does not have a fixed personal account and personal image. Thus, it is essential that people continually imagine their identity and construct their personal images. That way, they can have different characters.

6.2.2 Venting of life: blurry front stage and back stage
The second activities found from the interview is that Yiguan is usually used for publishing messages, which contain venting. That is, Yiguan users sometimes treat this application as a place where they can freely express their happiness or complaints.

Interviewee P1 was an introversive person. His WeChat account only contained social news. In few of the contents, he expressed himself, his emotions, and his feelings. Nonetheless, he still needs to express and vent his emotions.

“I am an introversive person. My friends all think that I have a gentle personality. But I actually have lots of moments that I feel down or sad. I don’t talk to other people because I don’t want them to think I am a man who always has complaints.” (P1, Male)
However, after using Yiguan, interviewee P1 started to express himself on Yiguan as he found that secrets could be kept and that nobody knew about his identity.

“I was very sad about my breakup with a girl. I didn’t know whom I should turn to for talking. I have thought about writing it down and publishing on WeChat or other real name social media, but I was afraid of being disdained by my friends or other acquaintance. This problem was solved when I find Yiguan. Many Yiguan users talk about their secrets and feelings on this social media. They encouraged me. So I just posted a message like ‘I miss you so much’ on Yiguan. After doing this, I felt so relieved. Now, every time I meet something bad, I will think of publishing it on Yiguan.” (P1, male)

Similar to interviewee P1, interviewee P11 also believed that Yiguan had assisted her substantially to deal with her negative emotions.

“I usually feel my job is really stressful. I need to face some annoying customers. I need a place where I can talk about my dissatisfactions and pressure. Yiguan is a good place for keeping secrets. In addition, after I published the messages, I will get many comments and likes, which indicates that many other people have the same feelings as I do.” (P11, female)

Interviewee P3 commented that she usually published messages on Yiguan about her emotions when she was happy or unhappy.

“For example, last semester in an elective course in the university, the presentation of my group got an A. I was really happy about it because we made great effort on that course. I published a message on Yiguan, telling other people that I’m so proud of my team. I think this kind of venting on Yiguan is much freer than other social media platforms I used. I don’t need to worry about if other people like or dislike the content I published, and meanwhile I can resonate with other users who have the same feelings or emotions with me.” (P3, female)
Interviewee P7 also discussed her experience of venting on Yiguan. According to her, she could be much braver to communicate her feelings and her messages could be much more casual on Yiguan than on other real-name social media.

“When I publish messages on WeChat or Weibo, I may worry whether other people, especially the people we know each other in real life, will like my content or not. Thus, I may pay much attention to the words and sentences of my messages. However, when I publish messages on Yiguan, I can say whatever I want. For example, I may publish a series of messages about one specific experience or feeling I have on Yiguan. I won’t do that on real-name social media platforms.” (P7, female)

According to interviewee P10, people publish casual or informal content on Yiguan because doing so is relative to the blurry front stage and back stage of their performance.

Interviewee P10 indicated that the content that she published on Yiguan would be more abstract on Yiguan than on other social media. She also pointed out that because of less social pressure on Yiguan, she needed to only express her thoughts based on what comes to her mind without further explanations. That way of expression on Yiguan is similar to the way of expression in the diary, in which other people do not have access.

"The messages that I publish on Yiguan are mostly very abstract. I mean, the words and sentences I write sometimes cannot be understood by others. I guess it is because I don't need to explain my words to others. I don't need to interact with other people or start a conversation. I just want to talk and make a post. The way I publish messages on Yiguan is so different from the way I do on WeChat or Weibo. Normally, I just write down every word that comes to my mind on Yiguan, without adding other explanations. However, on real-name social media, I will spend a long time arranging the words and sentences, and I will also explain clearly what I am talking about." (P10, female)

Goffman (1959) indicated that the performances hold and take place in the front stage. He defined front stage as “that part of individual's performance which regularly
functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.” (Goffman, 1959, p.22). The front region is the place where the actor is seriously playing out the script of impression management (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). In the front region, the actor avoids anything that is inappropriate according to the script (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). What happens in the front region is an attempt to manipulate the audiences (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 222). Compared to the front stage, the back stage is more private and isolated. Goffman (1959, p.24) defined the back stage as a place where “he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines, and step out of character.” It is also a place where a performer can relax. The back stage is where the actors do not need to engage in impression management; they can be themselves (Wallance & Wolf, 1995, p. 223). However, on Yiguan, the line between one’s frontstage and backstage is blurred. In other words, users on Yiguan tend to treat their frontstage performance and their backstage performance the same way.

In the case of P10, audiences know that a performance is being held in this region, but none of them has access to this region. The actress, P10, gives up conducting impression management, returning to a “self” which is the most comfortable and relaxed to herself. The actress makes her front region of performance becomes a part of the whole backstage. This kind of performance has blurry front stage and back stage.

With reference to why interviewee P10 choose to conduct that kind of performance, she believed that it was because the contents she published on Yiguan were mostly about feelings and emotions, which were abstract. Interviewee P11 also reasoned that when emotion and feelings were the core content of her venting, she would quit performing.

“I think the reason why my messages are more abstract on Yiguan is that most of my messages are talking about emotions. Emotion itself is very abstract. In addition, I may just publish a very short sentence. It’s difficult for others to understand what I am talking about.” (P10, female)

“I usually publish messages which consist of an instant and specific emotion. For example, if I feel anxious and depressed, I will publish my emotion directly by words.
The emotion will be the center of what I want to say. It's like throwing a pile of rubbish away. I throw my emotions on Yiguan.” (P11, female)

6.2.3 Tree-hole confessions: less desire for socializing

Some users on Yiguan also regard this social media platform as “tree-hole” confessions. Using it as a tree-hole, users confess their secret, feelings, and experiences on this social media platform. Relying on anonymity, Yiguan is a space where individuals can safely publish their personal “diary” without revealing their identity. Those who regard Yiguan as tree-hole do not present themselves or socialize with others. In contrast, it can be found from the interviews that those who regarded Yiguan as a place where they could express private thoughts and feelings might be reluctant to socialize with others on Yiguan.

Interviewee P9 pointed out in the interview that she had never interacted with other users on Yiguan but that she had interacted with people on other social media platforms. According to interviewee P9, she resisted interacting on anonymous social media because of the potential capability of strangers to detect her identity through her comments. In other words, she felt unsafe even as an anonymous user when her private information was exposed to strangers.

“Generally, I will spend more time on browsing and reading, and spend less time on interacting with others. I may leave comments and likes others messages on other social media platform, but I don’t want to leave too many traces on Yiguan because Yiguan is full of strangers.” (P9, female)

However, interviewee P7 pointed out the contradiction between Yiguan’s product positioning and product functions. As mentioned before, the product manager of Yiguan regards this application as a “tree hole” where “social phobia” can feel safe to share their secrets and feelings. Yet as a social medium, Yiguan has many functions that encourage users to interact with others. For example, Yiguan has hashtags which encourage users to jointly discuss a specific topic. Yiguan also has chatting rooms for
users who share the same interest. Yiguan’s function is contradictory with its positioning. As mentioned by P7 in the interview, a real “social phobia” would barely be socialized with other people.

“Personally, I don’t really like the current interface. There are too many contents of socializing on Yiguan. I will be a bit reluctant to socialize on Yiguan, because it was positioned as a ‘tree-hole’, where it’s private and safe for secrets. Yiguan said it was designed for the social phobia, for someone who is afraid to socialize with others. So I don’t think it should have so many content of socializing. If you open this application and it interface is colorful and full of designs for socializing, it feels a bit uncomfortable.” (P7, female)

6.2.4 Giving and receiving social support: the loop of behavioral confirmation

The next activity of users on Yiguan is giving and receiving social support. Many interviewees pointed out that the reason they preferred Yiguan to other social media platforms was that they could receive support from unfamiliar people and that they could assist others. Interviewees P1 and P5 shared their experience about how they support other users on Yiguan. According to them, they felt fulfilled after assisting others.

“For me, Yiguan is a platform where people can manually help one another. I usually go to the topic “asking for help” on Yiguan, if I know the answer to some questions, I will definitely leave a comment below.” (P1, male)

“I remember it was October, I published a message which talks about I will help others to solve math problems in their homework. Then I spent one day answering others inquiries. I feel very fulfilled about that.” (P5, male)

Except for giving support to others, many interviewees admitted that they received plenty of support from other Yiguan users.

“I really like Yiguan because every time I am down and I post messages on Yiguan, I will receive lots of encouragement and consolation. When I see those messages, I’ll feel better. I remember one day I couldn’t sleep until midnight, so I posted on Yiguan and
then a warm-hearted girl sent a private-message to me. She kept enlightening me and encouraging me. I think Yiguan is so magical that it can always comfort you.” (P3, female)

The interviewee P5 shared his story about a female graduate student whom he met on the platform. According to him, both of them had similar views about the postgraduate school examination. He said the girl gave him many pieces of advice about postgraduate study and examinations. After the conversations, they became close friends.

“Once I couldn’t fall asleep. I remember it’s November. I logged in Yiguan and I found a senior sister online, who couldn’t sleep as well. She is a graduate student. I asked her a lot about postgraduate research, as well as questions about graduate students. We actually have a thorough discussion, which is more in-depth than all the discussions that I had before. Maybe it was because I didn’t have a systematic understanding on the graduated life, and she is very willing to tell me what she has seen and heard, so we had a very happy talking at the time.” (P5, male)

It seems that after giving support and receiving support from others, users tend to develop close relationships with one another. It is not difficult to find that intimate relationship and trusts can be developed without too much time and work. Interviewee P6 also disclosed her story in which she got to know her friend on Yiguan because of a question about school activities. After several times of chatting online, they became intimate with each other. They will share their views every day. In addition, every time P6 felt upsets or depressed, she would turn to her friend for support.

“My major in the university is music history and folk music, and that girl learns history. The majors of us are similar, so we have lots of things to talk and to share. Then she became my very close friend. I send her the photo of my cat every day. She loves cats as well. Sometimes I feel unhappy because of some personal affairs, I will also send messages to her and chat with her. This girl is really important to me.” (P6, female)
Walther (1996) calls that kind of interaction the hyperpersonal interaction. In short, this notion explains why some form of interaction through digital media sometimes are marked by higher levels of emotional intensity and self-disclosure than face-to-face interaction (Lindgren, 2017). His theoretical approach is based on three aspects: receiver, sender, and the feedback between sender and receiver. He indicates that the computer-mediated communication (CMC) receiver tend to have an idealized perception of their partners. This is because CMC partners engage in an “overattribution” process, which enables them to build stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the strength of such impressions in light of information – misspellings, typographical errors, or excessive punctuation – on which they are built (Walther, 1996). This kind of over-reliance on minimal cues is much easier to be found when participants have no physical exposure to one another (Walther, 1996). Walther regards this phenomenon as “deindividuated.” He points out that the deindividuated phenomenon becomes more focus for members of particular online social support groups who share similar concerns, expertise, or maladies (Walther, 1996).

The next aspect is the message sender. In addition, CMC senders tend to optimize their self-presentation. According to Walther (1996), people’s selection and deployment of favorable impressions may be enhanced in CMC.

In the case of P5 and P6, they and their friends are both message receivers and message senders. Thus, an intensification loop of “behavioral confirmation” is magnified in minimal-cue interaction, such as on Yiguan (Walther, 1996). When Yiguan users provide support to others, the one that receives the support will idealize their partners and then the users will respond to this by further optimizing their self-image. (Lindgren, 2017). This behavior explains why some communications online with strangers might result in surprisingly intimate relationships.
6.2.5 Socializing including romantic dating: less loyalty towards the conversation and selective and fragmented performance

The next activity of users on Yiguan is socializing. Some users regarded Yiguan as a platform where they could make friends with others and establish romantic relationships with others. Interviewee P8 responded in the interview about her experience of socializing on Yiguan. She hoped to have a romantic relationship, but she could not find anyone in real life. Yiguan gave her the chance to know more people. Using the function of chat matching, she met her friend A on Yiguan.

“My friend told me that there are many interesting people on Yiguan, so I downloaded this application. In the beginning, I wish to find a guy that we can develop a romantic relationship. I published a message on Yiguan, saying that I want to make new friends. Then my friend A sent me a private message. Although I didn’t find a boyfriend finally, I really like A and we had a good time together.” (P8, female)

Because of the “behavioral confirmation” which has been discussed in the previous section, users can easily and quickly form close and intimate relationships with others. However, the activity of socializing on Yiguan has two characteristics that act as the obstacle of socializing with others.

First, interviewees of this study pointed out that users on Yiguan showed less loyalty during conversations with others. Interviewee P2 recalled his story with a university student on Yiguan. He found that people might be difficult to follow up with the progress of the events that they chatted with others on Yiguan. Because Yiguan has no fixed personal account and personal homepage, users on Yiguan cannot trace the identity of the other user. Thus, when users in the chat quit or abandon the conversation they had before, the interaction will be terminated.

“Sometimes your conversation with the guy is over and it is very difficult to find him again. It is possible that this person will not use the software anymore, or the frequency of use is not so high. If you want to hear more about his stories, or to follow up with a development of the situation, you will be unable to do those of things on Yiguan. I met
a girl before. She was in the first year of college. She had already taken the second year of college, but she was relegated. She was very dissatisfied with her major. She wanted to change her major. She didn't know what to do, and she didn't go to the lecture. Many classes were failed, and her relationship with her roommate was also very bad. I chatted with her once, and then she seems not using this application anymore. I would like to continue to care about her or ask her about her situation, but I failed.” (P2, male)

P4 also noted that conversations on Yiguan could be abandoned easily. He pointed out that some interactions on Yiguan were disposable. That is, a user may meet another person and start a conversation, but after chatting, their conversation will be terminated forever.

“If you socialize with different people and strangers, it will be exciting, but people will also have less loyalty to the conversations. The conversation on Yiguan is disposable. I don’t know if you realize or not. Sometimes you feel you’re having a good conversation, but the next day maybe the person you chat with will abandon the conversation with you and find another person to chat. I feel that this is different from QQ and WeChat. I think that the chat of Yiguan will last for a short time, and then it will be easier to be abandoned.” (P4, male)

The second characteristic of this activity is that users tend to have selective and fragmented performance when they are socializing with one another on Yiguan. This tendency is caused by asynchronicity, one of the biggest particularities of computer-mediated communication. Lindgren (2017, p. 74) summarized that one of the most prominent characteristics of digital sociality is asynchronous. That is, it does not happen in real time. Even if people use texting, chats, direct messaging, emails, and discussion forums for communicating steadily or responding to each other when they receive a message, these digital communications do not have to take place in real time, in the same way as an offline conversation or an online video call must (Lindgren, 2017, p.74). The digital tools and platforms allow for delays. In some contexts, one might respond within seconds or minutes; while at other times, one may take hours, days, months, or
even forever to reply (Lindgren, 2017, p.74).

Asynchronicity has two main advantages. One, asynchronicity makes it possible for large groups to have sustained interaction (Lindgren, 2017, p.75). Two, the possibility of moving in and out of a conversation — returning when we are ready and prepared — and the absence of ‘a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others’ enables us to feel safer, and to formulate our thoughts more freely (Lindgren, 2017, p.75). However, asynchronicity influences the coherence of performance. For example, a user publishes one message on Yiguan. Others can comment on the user’s message when they see the message. Then, the conversation can only proceed when the user receives that comment. In this case, because of the asynchronicity, the user is forced to make multi-segment performance. When users publish the first message, they are performing in the front region. After the completion of the performance, the actor leaves the stage. For now, the actor is off-stage, (s)he is not involved in performance anymore (Goffman, 1959). As long as the actor realizes that other people have interacted with the content published, the actor can be pulled back to the front stage for another performance. Thus, the self-presentation on Yiguan is fragmented. Users on Yiguan can barely have long-lasting performance and uninterrupted self-presentation.

Interviewee P5 discussed the function of Yiguan. He regarded Yiguan as the bulletin board system (BBS), which is a computer or an application dedicated to sharing or exchanging messages or other files on a network. P5 pointed out that sometimes no interactions occurred on Yiguan. If the original poster receives the message and replies, the conversation can proceed.

“I think Yiguan is like BBS. Sometimes a person publishes a message, and I leave comments to him. I can only wait until this person realizes (s)he has a message, then we can continue our conversation. Sometimes there is even no conversation because
people may not have interactions." (P5, male)

6.3 Gender difference in self-presentation and interactions on Yiguan

Macionis (2011) indicates that gender difference can influence people’s performance. This is because most men have greater social power than women. In typical real-time social interactions, gender differences involve demeanor, use of space, and smiling, staring, and touching (Macionis, 2011, p. 143). However, we can find more gender difference of the self-presentation and interaction online, particularly on anonymous social media.

The difference in interactions on Yiguan can be first discussed. The first and most significant gender difference in interactions on Yiguan was that men interacted with other users more often than women do. Findings also showed that most of the female respondents resisted the thoughts of socializing on Yiguan, and most of them regarded Yiguan as purely tree-hole confessions. In contrast, men were more willing to answer others’ questions, leave comments and start conversations with others.

"I have published messages to recruit members for an online group which shares the same hobby. For example, I have recruited members for writing a novel together. Although I failed to do that because there were few people who responded to my recruitment, I felt happy that I can interact with different people." (P2, male)

Based on the quote mentioned above, it is apparent that men’s self-presentation on Yiguan was also accompanied by the content for interaction. As mentioned before, some women regarded Yiguan as a public diary book in which they could freely express their thoughts and feelings. Besides, women were more likely than men to focus on self-disclosure online. In addition, some female interviewees also indicated that the contents of their message, which were about their feelings and emotions, were more abstract.
7. Conclusion and Discussion

7.1 Research questions revisit

Goffman (1959) argues in his book that society is constructed by actors, audiences, performance, and interactions between them. It is necessary for people to understand how to build the internal and external world and how to interact with others. Today, the rapid development of social media and digital technologies has made it possible for people to communicate with their loved ones and business partners regardless of their location and time zone. The emergence of anonymous social media has also brought back the rethinking of anonymity. Departing from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, and hyper-personal interaction, this thesis conducts 11 in-depth interviews to discuss the behaviors of users on an anonymous social media popularly known as Yiguan. The data collected have been analyzed, and the two research questions have been answered. We can thereby make a conclusion on the analysis.

RQ: What are the users’ activities on Yiguan? What are the characteristics of the users’ activities on Yiguan?

Based on 11 in-depth interviews, five main activities on Yiguan can be found. Those activities include self-disclosure, venting, tree-hole confessions, giving and receiving social support, and socializing and romantic dating.

The interviews provide insight into the characteristics of the users’ activities. The first characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan is that users on Yiguan can act as a different character. The character setting and personal images are fluid on Yiguan. Goffman’s concepts of stage and performance in self-presentation can be applied in order to understand the fluidity of characters. In contrast to the traditional performance that has certain actors and audiences, performance on Yiguan is like a group of masked actors performing for the masked audiences. In order to interact or communicate with one
another, both actors and audiences should speculate whom they are looking at, and then actors and audiences will continue to change their mask to make the performance creditable. Mead’s concept of self can also be applied to understand this process. One’s identity can be obtained by imagining how others perceive one’s image. When the person one is looking at does not have a fixed identity and personal image, one needs to continue to imagine one’s image and keep constructing one’s personal images. This is why users have fluid characters on Yiguan.

The second characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan is that their performances have blurry frontstage and backstage. Users on Yiguan tend to treat their front stage performance and backstage performance similarly. In some cases, actors and actress of the performance give up the management of their impressions on their front stage, thereby making the front region of their performance a part of the whole backstage.

The next characteristic is that sometimes users on Yiguan are less desirous of socializing with others. It can be found from the interviews that those who regard Yiguan as a “tree-hole” or confession house where they can secretly express their thoughts and feelings may be reluctant to socialize with others on Yiguan.

Based on Walther’s model of hyper-personal interaction, the next characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan is that users on Yiguan find it much easier to believe others and share their emotions and experiences with others than those who prefer face-to-face communication. In Walther’s model, the receivers of computer-mediated communication tend to have an idealized perception of their partners, while the senders tend to optimize their self-presentation. Thus, an intensification loop of “behavioral confirmation” is magnified on Yiguan (Walther, 1996). Moreover, users on Yiguan are more likely to focus on self-disclosure. This characteristic intensifies the loop of behavioral confirmation, thereby making it easier for them to have close and intimate relationships with their partners.
The next characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan is that users show less effort in continuing conversations with others. Yiguan users find it difficult to follow up with the progress of events that they have chatted with others on Yiguan. Findings also indicate that conversations on Yiguan can easily be abandoned. Some interactions on Yiguan are disposable.

The final characteristic of users’ activities on Yiguan is that users on Yiguan tend to make fragmented and selective performance. Communication on Yiguan has the feature of asynchronicity, which influences the coherence of performance. When users are conversing and interacting with other users on Yiguan, the conversations can only proceed when a user receives that comment. Because of asynchronicity, a user is compelled to make multi-segment performance.

Finally, this thesis briefly discusses the gender difference in self-presentation and interactions on Yiguan. The first and most significant gender difference in interactions on Yiguan is that men frequently interact with other users more than women. Men are more willing to answer others’ questions, leave comments and start conversations with others. Findings also show that men’s self-presentation on Yiguan is accompanied by the content of the interaction. However, women tend to publish more messages about themselves. Also, women are more likely than men to focus on self-disclosure online.

7.2 Discussion

7.2.1 The struggle of the audience

By the end of April, Yiguan has updated its application several times and added more functions to its application. Based on the audience’s reviews on App Store, it was found that many people disliked the new functions integrated into the new version because it had too many functions that encourage users to have more interactions.
Furthermore, analysis shows that users struggle when they are using Yiguan. That struggle is that users long for self-exposure, and at the same time, they want to be anonymous and “far away from socializing.” Many respondents in this study, especially women, pointed out that they felt uncomfortable that Yiguan was adding more functions to stimulate users to interact with others. In the interview, participants expressed their disappointment about Yiguan. They said the platform is gradually becoming a normal social media platform where social activities and interactions are mandatory for users. They wanted Yiguan to stay as a “secret base” or a “diary book”, where they could freely express their feelings and emotions and where they could meet people who also share the same feelings and emotions with them. However, a social media platform must be a place where social interactions and social activities take place. On the one hand, every information published on Yiguan is made public to all users. After all, it is as a social media platform. Although users on Yiguan cannot repost other users’ messages, they can still comment on posts, like content, and send private messages. It is inevitable for users on Yiguan to socialize with others and to have interactions with others. On the other hand, users’ wish of meeting people with the same mindset can only be fulfilled by interacting with others. Thus, it is evident that Yiguan users are torn between the desire of self-exposure and the resistance of socializing with others.

7.2.2 Goffman in the digital era and Yiguan

Although many users do not access Yiguan with the aim of self-presentation, Goffman’s dramaturgy theory provides the framework of this thesis. When Goffman first introduced his dramaturgy theory, he never imagined that humans would live in a digital world where people could communicate and interact with one another anonymously online. This thesis, however, is constructed beyond several concepts from Goffman’s study: self, stage, and performance.

The first concept is “self.” When users enter into a digital world where they cannot see
other’s face, the identity presented to others is influenced by what one’s perception of “self.” In contrast to traditional communication, other’s perception and imagination of one’s identity have less influence on the construction and presentation of “self” online. That kind of “self” is easier to control in online activities. As pointed out in this thesis, users on Yiguan tend to have a selective presentation of self and performance.

As for “stage” in the digital era, this concept is as complicated as the concept of “self.” Traditional communication and performance have relatively clear and distinguishable stages and settings. This means that users of traditional communication can easily distinguish which stage they are and which performance they are looking at. However, “stage” in the digital era has the characteristic of the blurry boundary. Anonymity makes all the performance and all the stages hidden in obscurity. It can also be found that the boundary between front stage and backstage are blurry when the performance takes place on a digital platform.

“Performance” is also an important concept in this study. In his theory, Goffman did not explicitly illustrate whether it is performed when both the audience and the actor are anonymous. By applying his perception of traditional communication, one may argue that no matter how users present themselves online, they are performing when they publish something in the public space such as social media. However, when the stage is difficult to find, distinguishing the audience will also be cumbersome.

7.3 Limitation and future studies

This thesis aims to investigate the characteristics of users’ activities on Yiguan. Although this thesis analyzed why users on Yiguan tend to have such characteristics, it could not explain why users on Yiguan engaged in different activities. This study also employed qualitative methods to answer the research questions. Because of the limitation of time and fund, only 11 people were selected to participate in this study. However, only four of the participants were males, and most of my interviewees were
students. As a result, sample bias might affect the validity of this paper. It is also necessary to point out that Yiguan is an application that is updated regularly. Because of this, Some functions will be added to or deleted from this application. In short, this thesis examines only the version of Yiguan before version 2.1.0. In other words, version 2.1.0 and subsequent updates will not be taken into consideration in this study.

It is pertinent that future research can focus on two aspects. First, it is recommended that future studies conduct quantitative research on the same topic to ascertain the relationship between the activities of users on the non-anonymous social media and the duration of using the platform. In addition, with more participants in the research, future studies can investigate more interesting characteristics of users’ self-presentation and interactions. Second, future studies should examine the activities on anonymous social media. Future studies can focus on the broader anonymous social media, rather than focusing on Yiguan.
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Appendix

1. The interview questionnaire

Theme 1 – General Questions
1. When did you start to use Yiguan?
2. For which reason did you choose to download Yiguan?
3. What is your frequency of using Yiguan?
4. Which theme and topic do you spend most of time browsing on Yiguan?

Theme 2 – the media use of social media and Yiguan
1. Except Yiguan, which social media do you use?
2. Which social media do you like the most? Why?
3. On Yiguan, post new content or read other’s messages, which one will you more likely to choose?
4. What kind of content do you tend to post on Yiguan?
5. Is there any difference between content that you post on Yiguan and other social media?
6. Is there any difference between the socializing behavior on Yiguan and other social media?

Theme 3 – the attitude toward Yiguan
1. Compared to other social media, what is good and what is less good on Yiguan?
2. Which goal do you want to achieve when you using Yiguan (Such as release negative emotion and pressure, satisfy our curiosity or enlighten others)?
3. What’s your attitude toward Yiguan’s anonymity?