

Article

A Study on Self-Presentation in Instrumental Performance Short Videos in the Digital-Intelligence Era

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Abstract: This study examines the self-presentation practices of instrumental musicians on short-video platforms, analyzing the multifaceted dimensions of content formats, dissemination strategies, and audience interaction. It explores how this medium reshapes musicians' self-expression, identity construction, and the "online" ecology of music. The research reveals that instrumental short videos serve not only as a window for skill display but also as a highly personalized and interactive "digital stage." Through carefully crafted audiovisual elements, strategic use of tags, and engaged interaction with viewers, performers actively construct their musical identity, artistic style, and personal appeal. This practice facilitates a multifaceted role transformation from "performer" to "content creator" and "personal brand manager."

Keywords: Digital-Intelligence Era; Self-Presentation; Short Video

1. Introduction

The Digital-Intelligence Era, characterized by the deep integration of digitalization and intelligent technologies, is fundamentally reshaping media landscapes and cultural practices. Against this macro-background, short-video platforms represented by Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou have rapidly emerged as predominant mediums for the audiovisual presentation of instrumental music performances. This novel mode of dissemination not only enables performers to transcend the spatiotemporal limitations of traditional physical venues such as concert halls and theaters, reaching a wider audience; it also significantly expands the channels available for musicians' self-presentation. Consequently, it generates considerable economic benefits and professional opportunities, compelling individuals to re-evaluate and strategically utilize media for self-expression.

1.1 Research Background: Media Transformation in the Digital-Intelligence Era and New Dissemination Scenarios for Instrumental Music Performance

The Digital-Intelligence Era, characterized by the deep integration of digitalization and intelligent technologies, is fundamentally reshaping media landscapes and cultural practices. Against this macro-background, short-video platforms represented by Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou have rapidly emerged as predominant mediums for the audiovisual presentation of instrumental music performances. This novel mode of dissemination not only enables performers to transcend the spatiotemporal limitations of traditional physical venues such as concert halls and theaters, reaching a wider audience, but it also significantly expands the

channels available for musicians' self-presentation. Consequently, it generates considerable economic benefits and professional opportunities, compelling individuals to re-evaluate and strategically utilize media for self-expression.

1.2 Theoretical Foundation: The Academic Lineage of Self-Presentation and Intrapersonal Communication

Examining this phenomenon through the lens of communication studies, the theories of self-presentation and mediated communication provide crucial analytical frameworks. At the micro-level, intrapersonal communication concerns the internal processes of information processing and meaning-making within an individual. The American pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead conducted pioneering and systematic explorations of this field in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his seminal work, *Mind, Self & Society*, Mead (1934, 2015) focused on the process of individual socialization, delving into the formation of "self"-consciousness. He explicitly proposed that the self is fundamentally a product of social experience, a structure that gradually takes shape through social interaction. By drawing the classic distinction between the "I" (the individual's spontaneous, initiative aspect) and the "me" (the internalized set of social norms and others' attitudes), Mead revealed that the self emerges and develops precisely through the sustained dialogue and dialectical interaction between these two facets. From this, he developed Symbolic Interactionism, emphasizing that the self is not innate but is constituted through social processes involving communication via symbols such as language and gestures. Individuals gain cognition through social interaction and, via the internal dialogue between the "I" and the "me" (i.e., intrapersonal communication), continuously form, adjust, and refine their self-conception under the influence of societal values and ongoing social exchanges (Mead, 1934, 2015).

Compared to the West, dedicated research on "intrapersonal communication" within Chinese academia started later and remained relatively marginal for an extended period. However, with the acceleration of social modernization and the full arrival of the Digital-Intelligence Era, individuals face unprecedented complexity in their information environment, and the pressures related to self-identity and social adaptation have intensified. This has increasingly highlighted the research value of intrapersonal communication. In recent years, domestic scholars have begun actively exploring its operational mechanisms in the contemporary context, drawing on resources from disciplines like psychology and sociology to construct a theoretical framework with local characteristics, thereby fostering an interdisciplinary field of inquiry.

1.3 Research Object, Method, and Questions: A Case Study Exploration Using the Douyin Account "Bao Gu"

Against the aforementioned theoretical and practical backdrop, this study focuses on the self-presentation practices of instrumental music performers on short-video platforms. The research selects the author's personally operated Douyin account, which features instrumental music performances (Douyin nickname: Bao Gu, ID: baogu16022), as the core case study. The account has been active since 2018, with over 200 published videos and a following of 5,000 users, offering a valuable sample for analysis. This study aims to explore the operational mechanisms and functional evolution of individual self-presentation within the specific media environment of the Digital-Intelligence Era through an in-depth investigation of this particular case.

To achieve this objective, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, focusing its analysis on three representative categories of videos published on the account: pop song adaptations, Chinese national-style instrumental music, and Western classical music. This

research will not only incorporate quantitative analysis of platform backend data—such as play counts, completion rates, likes, comments, shares, and follower demographics—to observe dissemination effects and audience feedback, but will also conduct qualitative analysis of specific video texts, including performance format, scene selection, captions, and interactive comments with users. This dual approach aims to interpret how the performer constructs the "me" through symbolic elements and engages with the imagined audience.

Through this analysis, the study seeks to answer the core question: Under the influence of short-video platforms' algorithmic logic and social culture, what characteristics does the self-presentation of instrumental music performers exhibit? What transformations have occurred in their interaction themes, interaction modes, and the resulting communicative efficacy? In this process, what kind of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication dynamics form between the performer's internal "I" and the externalized "me," and between the performer and the audience?

It is important to note that this study employs a single case study method. The research sample (the author's personally operated Douyin account) is non-randomly selected, and the data characteristics, along with the observations derived from them, primarily reflect the operational practices and dissemination phenomena of this specific account. Although this study attempts to reveal the complex mechanisms within the case through mixed methods, the generalizability of its findings is inherently limited. The conclusions cannot be directly extrapolated to short-video platform accounts of other types, fields, or scales, and certainly cannot represent the overall operational mechanisms at the platform level. For instance, discussions later in this paper regarding algorithmic recommendation or audience gender differences are based on correlational analyses linking this account's sample data with findings from prior research. Their external validity requires verification through subsequent studies employing more diverse and larger samples. The value of this research lies in providing a specific, contextualized perspective for understanding self-presentation in the digital age through an in-depth, "thick description" of a single case, and in proposing hypotheses that can be tested in future comparative studies.

2. Music as "Online" Reflexivity in Self-Presentation

Within the study of self-presentation, initial scholarly discussions often centered on literature, probing its significance and function. From an anthropological perspective, literature is understood as a form of human self-portraiture or auto-ethnography—more precisely, a reflexive ethnography. Linguistically, "reflexivity" denotes a grammatical category (e.g., reflexive pronouns) where an action refers back to the subject, creating a mutually referential relationship between subject and object, thereby achieving a unity between the actor and the acted upon. A classic reflexive expression is the philosophical axiom, "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"). This raises a pertinent question: does music possess a similar reflexive function?

Literature utilizes linguistic symbols to reflexively project human experience, serving as a cultural mirror for communities to observe and reconstruct the self. Music shares this isomorphic reflexive capacity but realizes the construction of subjectivity through acoustic media. The collective rhythmic resonance of drumbeats in African rituals enables individuals to perceive communal unity within sound waves. Beethoven's "Fate" motif abstracts the notion of "knocking fate" into an audible representation of life's struggles. Folk singing can reflexively heal individual trauma, while group chanting sublimates suffering into collective memory. In the Digital-Intelligence Era, technological empowerment has intensified this reflexivity in both dimensions: in literature, from online autobiographical writing to AI-reconstructed epics like the Gesar; in music, from AI-generated "life theme songs" to global netizens' "cloud choruses."

Together, they form a dual mirror of "sound and text," through which humanity anchors its sense of existence amidst technological currents – literature reflecting the rational self via semantic symbols, and music reflecting corporeal emotion through sonic order, co-shaping a reflexive system of self-observation for human civilization.

Based on observations from this case study, the reflexive self-presentation of short-video creators exhibits a dual character. Firstly, through platform-provided quantitative feedback tools—such as user profiles, heatmaps of play counts, and completion rate curves—creators can objectify their creative acts into analyzable data objects. It was observed in this account sample that this datafied reflexivity may enable creators to adjust content production strategies based on algorithmic logic. Secondly, AI-assisted review features within smart editing tools and digital twin technologies offer creators an interface for "otherized" self-observation, potentially reconstructing subjective cognition through the third-person perspective of a virtual avatar (digital double).

Concurrently, the dominance of digital music platforms and the influence of social media have reshaped the dissemination and commercial models of music. Digital platforms employ personalized recommendation algorithms to precisely cater to diverse user needs, fostering the growth of niche genres and independent musicians. Social media amplifies music's reach and societal impact through user sharing, commentary, and interaction. Furthermore, the rise of interactive music experiences and the trend towards personalized, diversified music reception have introduced new dimensions to music appreciation and dissemination. This phenomenon may provide new opportunities for the inheritance and innovation of musical culture and could play a role in social identity construction and cultural exchange.

In the Digital-Intelligence Era, music's function as a "dual mirror of sound and text" becomes increasingly prominent. It serves not only as a carrier of human emotion and culture but also as a crucial means for anchoring meaning within technological flows. Through self-presentation, music becomes a vital tool for individual self-expression and identity construction. From individual creation to collective interaction, music continuously reinforces its reflexive function in the process of self-presentation, constituting an indispensable form of cultural expression in the digital age.

3. Communicative Effects of "Music" in Self-Presentation

3.1 Self-Empowerment and Identity Construction

The innovation of media technologies has profoundly reconfigured the communication landscape. In the era of short video, music dissemination exhibits a significant "visual turn." The role of the disseminator has shifted from traditional mass media, which held discursive power, towards self-marketing, self-creation, and self-presentation. The rise of this "wave of communicative transformation" signifies a transfer of discursive agency from mass communication to self-presentation. Within this context, self-empowerment and identity construction emerge as key concepts, where self-empowerment serves as the pathway and identity construction as the outcome. Through self-empowerment, performers gain agency over their dissemination, while identity construction allows them to establish a distinctive image in the audience's perception, potentially achieving more effective communication and broader influence.

Based on observations from this case study, the rise of short-video platforms has afforded instrumental performers opportunities for self-empowerment and identity construction through self-presentation. As a practitioner, the author initially utilized social media platforms to share performances of the konghou (Chinese harp) primarily for student recruitment. To this end, performance videos were published on Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Channels. It was

observed that each platform possesses distinct functionalities and user bases, which may necessitate differentiated publishing strategies: content on Douyin focused on popularizing and promoting the konghou, Xiaohongshu emphasized recruitment, and WeChat Channels served for sharing daily activities. This platform-specific, strategy-driven approach facilitated the accumulation of experience and the gradual formation of a distinctive communication model on Douyin, as observed in this account's practice.

In this case study, technological empowerment appears to have dismantled traditional barriers to performance. The ubiquity of smartphones and short-video platforms may liberate instrumentalists from dependence on large stages and professional recording equipment. Whether in a professional concert hall or a living room, performers can capture their music via smartphone cameras and easily share it online, reaching a vastly wider audience. This empowerment can be seen as transcending spatial limitations and potentially enabling more accessible audience interaction, constituting a core facet of self-empowerment.

As a short-video-centric platform with a massive user base and powerful dissemination capacity, Douyin was chosen to promote awareness of the konghou. Given its demographically diverse user base, the content strategy in this case emphasized accessibility and engagement. Videos showcased not only traditional playing techniques but also experimental fusion pieces integrating the konghou with contemporary musical elements.

Based on observations from this case study, the generation of economic benefits may unlock new possibilities. Platforms enable the transition from enthusiast to economically viable creator. Features like virtual gifting allow fans to directly support performers, providing immediate income. Further monetization avenues observed in this case include promoting music courses in collaboration with training institutions or endorsing musical instrument brands. For instance, after amassing a substantial following, brand partnerships involving video demonstrations of instrument tone and performance were found to drive product sales and generate significant revenue. This economic empowerment may enhance the performer's livelihood and provide resources to reinvest in musical creation and performance, fostering further professional development.

In this case study, the expansion of social networks appears to reshape the performer's musical community. Traditional music networks are often constrained by geography and genre. Short-video platforms may dissolve these boundaries, allowing performers to interact with musicians and enthusiasts across regions and styles, exchange insights, and engage in mutual learning, thereby potentially cultivating a translocal music community.

Through this case study, it was observed that instrumentalists can actively deconstruct traditional musician labels—such as the "aloof" or "excessively serious" professional stereotype. By presenting performances in a relatable, lifelike manner, they highlight music's connection to everyday life, potentially crafting an "approachable musician" persona. Videos showcasing the creative process, instrument maintenance, or the stories behind the music reveal the performer's multifaceted identity as a musician.

Furthermore, in this case, performers may construct identity through the integration of cultural elements. Collaborations with international musicians to create cross-cultural works could foster an identity as a "transcultural musician." Simultaneously, employing modern music production technologies (e.g., synthesizers, editing software) to innovatively adapt traditional performances creates contemporary pieces, potentially attracting younger audiences and forging an identity as a "modern musician" who bridges tradition and innovation.

In this case study, to strengthen in-group identification within the music community, performers actively participated in challenges (e.g., "instrument relay," "arrangement challenges"). Such engagement was observed to boost visibility and may foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among peers. The proliferation of instrumental short videos on

platforms like Douyin suggests their significant practical value: they serve not only as effective vehicles for personalized self-expression but also as emerging pathways for revitalizing traditional cultural elements, enabling their innovative dissemination and inheritance. This case study illustrates the dual nature of the visual turn in connecting individual expression and cultural transmission. It is precisely through interpersonal communication and interaction with others that the performer's self-empowerment and identity construction are reciprocally affirmed and realized.

3.2 Semiotic Recombination of Traditional Music

In the author's self-presentation practice, a conscious emphasis is placed on the dialogue and transformation between the "traditional" and the "modern," thereby assigning new meanings to traditional musical symbols. Undoubtedly, music, as a critical artistic form, has historically served social development in profound ways. Tracing back to the Zhou Dynasty, a sophisticated "ritual-music" system was established, aiming to regulate social order and realize political ideals of hierarchy and harmony between rulers and subjects. Confucius, the foundational figure of thought, further emphasized music's pedagogical function, believing it could transform social customs and positively influence public morals.

Moving into the modern era, music's social functions expanded into richer dimensions. Whether in the form of inspiring mass music, anti-war music that consolidated national strength, or the New Music Movement that disseminated new ideas and culture, music not only continued its role in educating the public but was also endowed with the powerful capacity to boost morale and propagate progressive ideologies and scientific knowledge.

In the contemporary context, alongside the vigorous rise of self-media platforms, the function of music has undergone another significant shift. It is no longer confined to traditional roles of propaganda or social cohesion but has been assigned more diverse and personalized meanings. Music has become a vital channel for individual self-expression, emotional release, and identity formation, as well as an effective medium for building virtual communities, engaging in social discourse, and facilitating cultural consumption and commercial marketing. The boundaries of its functions continue to expand, deeply integrating into all aspects of contemporary social life and continuously shaping new cultural landscapes and modes of social interaction.

Within the ecology of instrumental music dissemination on Douyin, popular music, with its accessible melodies, distinct rhythms, direct emotional expression, and a deep, universal "auditory memory bank" accumulated through extensive use in internet culture, has become a core vehicle for creators' self-presentation. The author's performance model of "popular repertoire + konghou performance" represents a consciously chosen and encoded self-presentation strategy. The combination of three representative popular songs—The Sorrow of Missing Across Time, Slow Slow Tune, and Lady Sheshang—with the modern-reconstructed instrument konghou serves multiple purposes. Firstly, performing popular melodies on the konghou demonstrates personal technique and aesthetic sensibility, fulfilling a basic function of self-expression.

Secondly, the selection of these specific pieces is not arbitrary but precisely targets particular cultural layers: The Sorrow of Missing Across Time connects with the "anime music" community, Slow Slow Tune resonates with the "gufeng" (ancient-style song) aesthetic, and Lady Sheshang links to "ethnic-popular fusion" and square dance culture. This selection itself functions as a core signifier through which the creator declares belonging and cultural identity to targeted communities, actively embedding themselves into a specific cultural-social map.

Furthermore, choosing repertoire closely associated with contemporary trends transforms instrumental performance into a medium for participating in collective cultural dialogue. The

creator aims to leverage the dissemination momentum of trending topics, integrating their performance content into broader community discussion streams, seeking resonance and connection with groups that share common cultural memories and interests. The “collision of ancient and modern” experience produced by grafting the konghou’s unique timbre and techniques onto popular melodies—this innovative semiotic recombination—is both an artistic expression and a means to attract the attention of specific communities and establish nodes of communication.

Therefore, the essence of this model is the creator’s utilization of the selection, recombination, and presentation of musical symbols to conduct multi-dimensional self-presentation: expressing individual artistry, declaring community identity, and actively participating in trend-based social connection-building.

3.3 Technological Affordance and Algorithmic Feedback

The interface design of Douyin profoundly reshapes the underlying logic of user creation and dissemination. Its core features and algorithmic mechanisms jointly construct a dynamic, cyclical communication ecosystem. The “Shoot Same Style” feature, with its minimal operational steps, stimulates large-scale imitation. By simply clicking the “Duet” button in the share menu of a target video, users can choose layouts like side-by-side, top-bottom, or picture-in-picture, and apply filters or stickers, seamlessly replicating the spread of viral trends like the Seaweed Dance. This technological affordance significantly lowers the barrier to creation, enabling ordinary users to quickly participate in trends, forming viral chains of dissemination and even spawning derivative works (e.g., costume-change duets), further blurring the boundaries between originator and imitator.

Simultaneously, the platform’s algorithmic recommendation system continuously optimizes content distribution by analyzing user behavior data (e.g., dwell time, interaction frequency). However, this pursuit of efficiency incubates the risk of “information cocoons.” Users become enveloped in layers of content homogenized around their interests, while creators are passively driven to reinforce singular predictions of audience preferences, becoming trapped in a cycle of “traffic anxiety” that narrows creative output. This phenomenon has attracted regulatory attention. In a 2025 special campaign, the Cyberspace Administration of China guided platforms like Douyin to introduce “anti-cocoon” tools such as “One-Click Break Cocoon” and “Content Preference Assessment.” These tools aim to use visualized data (e.g., distribution of a user’s recently viewed tags) to help creators overcome cognitive limitations.

3.3.1 Precise Push-Notifications via Big Data Analysis

In the era of big data, user behavioral characteristics and preferences can be precisely captured and analyzed through data. Taking the three representative works analyzed in this study as examples, their recommendation distribution on the Douyin platform exhibits a significant pattern. Recommendations on the video detail page constitute a dominant 75.3%. This indicates that most users, while browsing, tend to directly click on videos of interest to view them on their dedicated pages. Other recommendation channels account for 20.5%, encompassing various but more dispersed methods. Recommendations via the creator’s personal profile page and message notifications account for 2.5% and 1.7%, respectively. This distribution reflects Douyin’s utilization of its robust big data analytics capabilities to accurately discern user preferences—including favored video genres and frequently used background music—and subsequently push content precisely to the “For You” pages of targeted viewers. This algorithmic curation and precise strategy enhances the between content and user demand. It enables videos to reach target audiences more efficiently, allowing them to stand out amidst the vast information flow and achieve broader dissemination with more reach.

3.3.2 Dissemination Within Organizational Networks

The Douyin platform not only supports community chat functions within its ecosystem but also achieves seamless integration with WeChat, a pivotal social tool. This cross-platform connectivity expands the social space for music dissemination. Active individual account users on Douyin often effortlessly share interesting videos or music they encounter with friends and family via the one-tap share function. This sharing behavior extends beyond one-to-one interactions to one-to-many scenarios, such as sharing videos into WeChat family or friend groups. Within these strong-tie networks, music dissemination transcends mere information transfer, becoming an embodiment of emotional connection and cultural resonance. This method fosters a complete and robust chain of within intimate circles. This dissemination mode, grounded in trust and close relationships, significantly amplifies the communicative effect and influence of the music. It facilitates rapid diffusion within smaller circles and may trigger broader, thereby propelling the music into wider social strata.

4. The Audience (To Whom) and the Effect (With What Effect): An Internalization-Externalization Feedback Loop

Within the framework of communication studies concerning the audience ("To Whom") and effects ("With What Effect"), traditional mass communication theory often positioned the audience as terminal consumers—the final destination of information flow. However, in the short-video era, the role and influence of the audience have undergone a significant transformation. An in-depth analysis of the follower demographics for the studied account reveals the following characteristics:

Firstly, in this case study, the follower base exhibits a pronounced trend toward youthification. Specifically, viewers aged 18 and under constitute 13.2%, those aged 18-23 account for 35.52%, and the 24-30 age group represents 25.89%. Viewers aged 31-40, 41-50, and 50+ account for 17.26%, 4.06%, and 5.08%, respectively. This data suggests that the account's primary follower base is concentrated within the 18-30 age range, predominantly comprising university students. This phenomenon can be interpreted from two perspectives within this specific case: first, viewers within this age range may share similar life stages and cultural environments with the creator, potentially facilitating resonance and the formation of aligned cultural values; second, the account's focus on popular music appears to align with the aesthetic preferences of younger audiences. Consequently, it is possible that, through the precision of big data algorithms, such content may be more likely to be recommended to young viewers with similar interests.

Secondly, within this account's audience, female users significantly outnumber male users. This observed distribution could be attributed to the distinctive physiological and emotional characteristics often associated with female users, who may tend to exhibit greater emotional expression and sensitivity to emotional elements within musical content. This might make them more susceptible to emotional resonance with the music shared by the account. Particularly since the creator is female and the disseminated content primarily involves reinterpretations of film and television Original Soundtracks (OSTs), it is possible that this format aligns closely with the aesthetic standards of many female users, thereby potentially attracting substantial female followership in this case.

Based on the data from this account, the audience demonstrates a high degree of similarity in musical literacy and cognitive capacity, with convergent tastes and preferences. For music creators, analyzing the aggregate audience profile can help them better grasp their audience's aesthetic predilections, thereby potentially producing content that better meets audience expectations. Simultaneously, timely audience feedback provides invaluable reference points, which may aid creators in exploring new possibilities during the creative process.

In this communicative loop as observed in the case study, metrics such as likes and comments constitute core references for creator self-feedback. It was observed that creators adjust their content and expressive strategies based on this data—for instance, modulating the humorous delivery of educational content. This immediate data feedback appears to form a regulatory mechanism of "internalization-externalization": on one hand, creators were seen to calibrate their content direction based on interaction data (e.g., a UGC blogger adjusting improvisational segments according to comments); on the other hand, they may leverage the algorithmic amplification of positively-received content to enhance their self-value and identity. Ultimately, through a spiral process of "imitation-feedback-optimization," creators can be seen to achieve the dynamic evolution of their agency in self-presentation. This observed process may not only enhance the creator's communicative efficacy but also potentially strengthen their influence and the sense of identification within the audience.

5. Conclusions

The technical affordances of short-video platforms have significantly empowered the interactive dynamics of self-presentation. By lowering professional barriers and expanding audience reach, these platforms have fostered new performance paradigms and expectations for interaction. This mode of communication blurs the traditional boundaries between "stage" and "audience" in music dissemination, facilitating the formation of interest-based "virtual music communities". For performers, this represents an unprecedented opportunity for self-expression, connection, and professional development.

This practice of self-presentation not only embodies the philosophical notion of "I perform, therefore I am" but also highlights the central role of music in constructing self-identity, conveying emotion, and transmitting cultural values between the individual and the collective. Short-video platforms provide instrumentalists with a novel space for self-presentation, enabling them to redefine their musical identities in the digital age, extend their artistic boundaries, and establish closer connections with their audiences. This model enriches both the forms and content of music dissemination, simultaneously offering new pathways and opportunities for the inheritance and evolution of musical culture.

Through this process, a new "prosumer-audience" relationship emerges from the deep interaction between performer and viewer, transcending the unidirectionality of traditional music dissemination to achieve a bidirectional flow of communication and shared emotional resonance.

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