Research on the Communication of "Online Graduation" in Universities from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains: A Case Study of Online Graduation of the Communication University of China

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Abstract: Due to the closed-off management of campuses under the COVID-19 epidemic, most universities performed the online graduation ceremony in the graduation seasons from 2020 to 2022 by means of mobile internet live video streaming. Online graduation, as an important ceremonial communication, realizes the value of the interaction ritual chain by comprehensively using the means of trans-temporal communication, network empowerment, interaction, performance and so on, completes the shaping of the university spirit and the construction of the spiritual community, and completes the information communication and brand shaping to the society, thus expanding the influence and popularity of the university brand.

1. Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 made it impossible for all the fresh graduates of many universities to attend the graduation ceremony, so the online graduation ceremony based on Internet live video technology has become the mainstream operation mode of many universities. Online graduation breaks through the time and space constraints and extends the time and space of the ceremony, allowing more participants to be involved, including not only the direct participants of the traditional graduation ceremony, but also the social network of the direct participants, as well as the attention of the audience and the media without any academic relationship, thus virtually forming a brand communication activity. To some extent, this ritual communication in the new media era has also become a new path for university brand building. The live video streaming of online graduation from Communication University of China reached 43 million viewers across the network through the combination of online and offline, synchronous multi-point, studio and slow live streaming, with a total reading of over 100 million [1]. While completing the graduation ceremony, universities have also expanded their audience through the mobile Internet and social platforms, which has not only condensed the consensus of teachers and students, but also attracted the attention of the whole society, thus realizing the spread of the school's popularity and influence. Thus, it is another new way to spread the brand of universities. Ritual communication building will improve the place experience and create brand value [2]. Arguably, the online graduation ceremony live video streaming has more obvious brand communication effect than any simple advertisement.

2. The Concept of Interaction Ritual Chain Theory and its Operating Mechanism

The theory of interaction ritual chain is from the field of sociology and was first proposed by Collins in his book *Interaction Ritual Chain* in 2004. It is an integration of religious ceremony theory, interaction ritual theory and symbolic interaction theory. Its in-depth interpretation of social emotions, feelings and group dynamics is widely used in communication, especially in the interpretation of new media communication. The interaction ritual chain mainly contains the following meanings:

1) Situation, the starting point of sociological theoretical research, is the research object of micro-sociology. All people's interactive behaviors take place in specific situations.

2) The four elements of the interaction ritual chain: Two or more people are present at the same time and influence each other through their physical presence; set up barriers to exclude outsiders; Participants focus on the common target and become the focus of attention; sharing emotional state, i.e. participants share their emotions and feelings and elucidate the emotional experience.

3) Four outcomes of the interaction ritual chain: Group unity, a sense of membership; The individual's emotional energy, the feeling of self-confidence, high spirits and initiative when taking actions; A symbol, sign, or other representation of a group; Moral sense, maintain the sense of justice of the group to prevent infringement by violators [3].

The theory of interaction ritual chain well explains that the development of modern information technology and mobile Internet in ritual communication has changed the way and state of participating in rituals in the past, and the physical presence in physical space is not a necessary condition for rituals [4], because it can enable individuals to participate in and experience important events in the way of "common presence" out of physical space, and become historical participants and witnesses.

3. Elements of Interaction Ceremony Chains in "Online graduation"

3.1. Internet Live Video Streaming Establishes the Situation of "Virtual Presence"

"Ceremony in any form is a kind of communication" [5]. Collins believed that every ceremony has to be held in a specific place since ancient times, and the realization of "physical presence" in a specific physical space is an essential element of interaction ceremonies. For the traditional university graduation ceremony, teachers and students should be present together to solemnly complete each step and process in the same agreed time and space background, so as to realize the complete spread of the ceremony. Due to the fact that the dense contact of the crowd is strictly limited under the spread of COVID-19 epidemic, the Internet live video streaming can break away from the restrictions of specific physical space and specific time to realize the "virtual presence" of teachers, students and viewers. The ritual activities and the specific time and space form a close, complete and multi-dimensional display as a whole. A few representatives on the scene can share the solemn ceremony with more participants in front of the screen, and exchange and interact with each other through watching, commenting, demanding and liking. Although such an interactive form may not be as infectious as the atmosphere of physical presence, it can still arouse the enthusiasm of participants and bring everyone into this "important space" and "important moment". The information brought by all-media communication wraps and infiltrates everyone's senses, creating a huge ceremony scene with virtual and real blending and borderless meaning sharing. The new media has provided feasible technical support for the crowd gathering and ceremony participation that broke through the time and space boundary [6].

3.2. Social Network Live Video Streaming Expands "Ceremony Access"

The traditional university graduation ceremonies are limited by the physical space and time. After all, there are only a few people can attend the graduation ceremony, thus forming the so-called "barrier to exclude outsiders". In modern times, information technology and internet live video streaming make the university graduation ceremony, which was originally a special ceremony boundary, be virtually expanded and extended to amplify the energy of the transmission field. The "barrier to exclude outsiders" emphasized by Collins has been gradually weakened and eliminated in the mobile Internet and social media communication environment. Online graduation has become a spectacular ceremony attracting tens of millions of people's eyes, completing a university spirit communication and brand promotion for teachers and students, alumni, stakeholders and the general public.

3.3. All Participants Share Meaningful Symbols, and the School Brand and University Spirit Become the Focus of Attention

Every symbol in the ceremony carries the intention of the communicator and conveys value and significance. The university spirit to be conveyed in "online graduation" is a relatively abstract existence and an imaginary community, which relies on specific communication symbols to concretize abstract concepts. Only when members share these specific symbols can they be transformed into an imaginary spiritual community. These communication symbols are mainly divided into two categories: linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols:

Linguistic symbols: The president's speech *Students, Please Believe in the Future* at the 2020 Graduation Ceremony of the Communication University of China gives young students who are about to graduate infinite expectation and sustenance. In addition, the school motto repeatedly appeared in the video, "Integrity, Professionalism, Erudition and Competence" appeared in the camera for many times, becoming the core symbol of the university spirit.

Non-linguistic symbols

Visual symbols: The graduate representative selected by the Communication University of China is a graduate who lived in Wuhan, where the epidemic was the most serious. She participated in the live video streaming with the towering Yellow Crane Tower and the busy Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge in the background, representing the victory of our country against the epidemic and the will of our nation. Each representative selected is the embodiment of the symbol. At the same time, a specially-made anti-epidemic short film was broadcast during the ceremony, which further demonstrated the indomitable spirit of fighting against the COVID-19.

Musical symbols: School song, as the core component of campus culture, is the call and encouragement of all teachers and students internally, and the display and declaration of the image of the school at the right time externally, which carries the ideal of educators, expresses the pursuit of the educated, and is the spiritual totem of the university. Collective singing of school songs must be the climax of graduation ceremony. On-line collective singing and resonance evoke the innermost feelings of teachers and students, with enthusiasm surging and passion flying. All feelings are sublimated to the highest point.

3.4. Sharing Emotional State

American anthropologist Clifford Goltz thought the ceremony is a "cultural performance". Graduation is naturally a performance. Whether it is the most important speech delivered by the president at the ceremony, or the speech given by representatives of students and parents, or the talent show of outstanding graduates and the presentation of alumni' work performance, it is done in

the connected cloud, and shapes the personality and brand of the university by performing, showing the humanistic charm of the university.

The interactive communication of modern information technology has changed the one-way communication state of the traditional ritual communication. The message area, comment area and bullet screen of each communication platform are opened, so that all people can express their views and attitudes, and directly participate in such a great moment, and truly become participants and witnesses of history. For example, Zhang Shaogang and other on-site hosts will give timely feedback and interaction according to the follow-up posts, which is difficult to achieve in the traditional graduation ceremony. No matter how many people participate in the ceremony, it is very important for everyone to express themselves. Participating together and constructing a ceremony communication field that can "share", "unite" and "resonate with emotions" makes everyone the protagonist of this important moment, and everyone's sense of participation is greatly mobilized through the bullet screen of bilibili or the interactive area and message area of other social platforms.

4. The Communication Effect of the Interaction Ritual Chain of "Online graduation"

4.1. Unity of Groups Enhances the Sense of Identity among Members

A nation must have its own solemn ceremony as the best way to feel its national integrity and national greatness [7]. Teachers, students and social concern groups who participate in the online graduation can continuously comment, forward and share through social media, further enhancing the activity of the group, and enhancing the group identity by sharing their views, opinions and emotions on the details of the same thing and activity. The first live video streaming on clients such as xuexi.cn successfully extended "Online graduation" from the live end to the mobile social media platform through the forwarding of WeChat and Tik Tok social media, forming secondary communication and multi-level communication, and continuously amplifying the influence. The interactive topics are enlarged in a fission way, and the emotional energy accumulated in the interactive ceremony is more abundant, which can not only enhance the emotional identity of all teachers, students and alumni, but also enhance the pride of all relevant personnel. Clearly, it is a very efficient means to construct the spiritual community of the university and spread the spirit of the university. The online graduation from Communication University of China was broadcast live on more than 20 authoritative media outlets such as xuexi.cn and People's Daily. On that day, the number of online people on the whole network exceeded 30 million, and the number of related topics read the next day exceeded 400 million.

4.2. The Emotional Energy of the Individual Is Enhanced by the Interaction

Expression is the most direct way for others to feel their emotions while watching a live video. Through lyrical expression on the platform, the participants of the ceremony can feel the emotional energy of other members, and constantly interact with the whole group and other members in information and emotion during the ceremony, such as leaving messages in the live streaming area, flooding the screen in bilibili, sharing links, pictures and words in their WeChat circle of friends, expressing their views and opinions in the class group, highlighting their sense of existence and membership, so as to further strengthen the connection between individuals and organizations, and the emotions expressed are consistent with those of the group, thus further enhancing the emotional energy of individuals.

4.3. Group Symbol Cognition is Further Strengthened

The symbols representing group value and group spirit are constantly strengthened in the interaction. The frequency and density of symbol connection and interaction between individuals and between individuals and groups are constantly improved, increasing the collective excitement, forming an interactive ceremony, and jointly owning and sharing this ceremony. The symbol and identity are amplified and spread through the Internet. The influence of the ceremony will spread further and longer under the "empowerment" of the Internet.

At the "Online graduation" ceremony of Communication University of China, the strong faculty of the school was widely spread. For example, the famous host, Mr. Zhang Shaogang, led the graduates of broadcasting and hosting major to host the whole process, which made him the best brand spokesperson, highlighting the strength of school teachers. Students' talent shows interspersed during this period are the dominant majors of communication universities, which in itself is the best brand communication. Moreover, nearly 20 alumni from all walks of life, either online or via video, showed the achievements of the graduates of CUC on various fronts. The jobs and professional achievements of alumni were displayed, especially the creation and influence of animation graduates in the animated film *Nezha* fully demonstrated the professional strength and characteristics of the school, which is undoubtedly the best brand advertising.

5. Conclusions

The online graduation from 2020 to 2022 achieved remarkable communication effect with the help of the Internet under the background of the COVID-19 epidemic. It not only fulfilled the basic task of graduates' graduation ceremoniously, but also achieved great social influence and brand communication. A university must also have its own solemn ceremony to gather the consensus of teachers and students and construct the spiritual community of the university. The form of online graduation not only brings participants to the ceremony, but also forms a huge virtual field through information technology and new media, bringing attention from alumni groups and the whole society. It not only expands the energy field of ceremony communication, but also is a good path for university brand communication. Nevertheless, what is certain is that even if the epidemic disappears in the future, more and more colleges and universities will put the graduation ceremony online, opening a new era of brand communication in colleges and universities.

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