

DANWEI

Transcript of podcast interview with Zhanzuo.com users

Introductions: Real Name System

Welcome to a special podcast episode from Danwei FM. I'm your host Robert Ness. In this episode, I interview users of Zhanzuo.com. Zhanzuo.com, one of several campus social networking sites in China trying to clone the success of Facebook in the Chinese market. The subject of discussion is the real name system, or 实名制 (shímíngzhì) used on Zhanzuo.

A website with a real name system, also known as identity verification, requires one to enter one's true name upon registering as a user. It is a controversial topic among China's netizens, many of whom see it as a big-brotherish attempt to clamp down on free speech, while others argue it forces accountability for what you say and cuts down on flames, extremest polemics, and online fraud.

Yet, real name registration is fundamental to social networking sites. After all, How could you look up your high school friends on Facebook, or connect with colleagues on LinkedIn, if people registered false names like "Feifei" and "Steamed Bun"? Observers from outside of China, who take real name registration for granted, should look to the China's BBS culture of anonymity to understand why Chinese users see things differently.

Internet forums, commonly known in China by the acronym BBS for bulletin board system, has been the most popular form of online media in China's campuses, since the earliest days of the Chinese Internet.. BBS became popular as a forum for free expression. Free expression was enabled by anonymous registration. Anonymity meant one did not have to fear consequences or reprisal for sharing personal secrets, violating social norms or taboos, leaking censored or sensitive information, or being critical of the system.

This culture of anonymity was attacked in 2005 when several campus BBSs instituted a real name system. The controversy grew as officials later began proposing real name systems for blogging and online gaming.

This is the challenge for the Facebook model in China: trying to promote a system where real names are fundamental, in the heartland of BBS-style anonymity.

About the interviewee's

Please take note, these interviewees are not representative of Zhanzuo's average user. Zhanzuo works with leaders of student organizations, providing them with resumé -building training activities and support for their organizations events, and in return these students use their influence among their peers to promote the Zhanzuo platform. This is an interview these student leaders conducted at one of their training events.

Interviews

Student 1: China has a bunch of these type of websites. But what attracted me [to this site] was the authenticity of the environment. This is unlike other websites where everyone uses false names and provides false information about themselves. In Zhanzuo everyone uses their true names, true information, and interact with their true feelings. This is what attracted me, and what prompted me to cooperate with Zhanzuo, I wanted to introduce Zhanzuo to even more of China's university students, and make some *genuine* friends. Thats how I feel.

Robert: Now, when you provide your real name, this conflicts a bit with traditional BBS culture. In BBS you anonymously participate in conversation. This is different right? Given this BBS culture, don't you feel a bit strange when you type in your true name and true information?

Student 1: When you use this website, the point is making friends, and allowing your friends to understand you better. If you feel strange about it then you can simple provide less information about yourself. You can decide how much your willing to allow other people to know about yourself. Our site doesn't require you to tell everybody everything about yourself. That would actually be bad for everyone and we don't want that. You need to maintain your privacy, and have other people respect that privacy. When you're making friends, you want your friends to know certain things about yourself so they can understand you better, for example your interests and your hobbies. On this site we can use photos, text descriptions, journals and other blog-like interactive features, like discussions, polls, different kinds of methods to share ideas. Relative to BBS, Zhanzuo is a space for letting your friends get to know you better. This is my take on it.

Student 2: I want to talk about about the true name system. On certain sites, including QQ and MSN, there are people who constantly register new names, so all the names are taken up. But if your the end goal is to get to know somebody, then you have to tell them your real name. So why in the first step do you have to go through so much trouble to find out what someone's real name is? Why not just tell everyone what your name is in the first step? What's in a name anyway? It's just a name. Nothing bad is going to come from simply telling other people your name.

Its the most simplest thing you can give, and the most basic way to let people contact you.

Student 3: The Real Name System is about responsibility. If you contribute something to a BBS, you don't have to be responsible for what you say. So maybe you purposely say something extreme in order to get other people to take notice of what you are saying. So because of this some people start to think, maybe this space isn't that great. Now if you have to share your real name and make your personal information public, then what do you expect society to give you back in return? What do you expect the sharing of that information to do for you? You have to think about that. Also, you have to be responsible for what you say in the site. Your conversation then becomes more pure, the point of view you express becomes clearer and more genuine. The atmosphere of the entire website becomes better and better. It tends towards a more decent, open, and authentic atmosphere for university students to interact.

Student 4: What I want to say is, we all have these same needs in both the real world and the virtual world. Online, we can meet these needs. We are all going to have secret things that we don't want other people to know, but we still wish for a way to vent these things, and we end up choosing BBS and blogs to do so anonymously. But Zhanzuo has all these features like information sharing and friending that reflect our real lives. Using these features requires one to have a true sense of self that they are willing to exhibit.

Robert: I know this is what you all personally think when it is you faced with the decision of giving your real name when you register for a website. What about your friends? Do you have friends who might say, "If I have to enter my real name, I won't feel comfortable, or I won't be willing to express what's inside me"...

Student 5: It just happens I was talking to some people about this yesterday. I told them to go to Zhanzuo and check it out. They asked, "Is that a real name registration? Do you have to give your mobile phone number?" That was the first thing they asked. When I told them it was real name based then they were no longer interested. I asked them why. They said, "because you can't speak freely. The purpose of the Web was to give people a space where they can talk as they please. If there's a real name system and that public place is lost, then I'd rather not use that site. It holds no value for us." So they don't want to use it. I think alot of people want a virtual space with secret identities where true feelings can be expressed. I also think that a real name system is an inevitable part of the development of the internet. When the web first started, everyone was excited with the emergence of virtual spaces like QQ. You could conceal your identity and interact with strangers and even make

friends with some of them. But then Internet crime started to occur. While you heard stories of people falling in love online, you couldn't ignore the phenomenon of online fraud. So the demand for online space with authenticity emerged, and that's why the real name system came about. Some people like it and some people don't but it is definitely a necessary part of the web.

Student 6: I think what the real name system embodies most is trust. Only by providing your name does it show that you have trust for the people you're giving it to. When other people provide their name, it implies that on this platform there is mutual trust and respect in the interaction between all its users. It's just like what this friend here just said about speaking freely, if the conversation in one place is too extreme then people are not going to use it anymore, people are going to want to find a new platform. So in Zhanzuo, you make real friends. You have your groups, you have your hobbies, and you use these things to find people who have things in common with you.

I met a Qiqihaer University Student on Zhanzuo. They have an event during Summer vacation where they ride bicycles from Qiqiha'er all the way to Hainan. This kind of long distance travel is really risky, and I'm interested in that kind of thing. Through Zhanzuo I was able to interact with them, and their experience had a deep impact on me. So I think that on this type of platform, which has this kind of trust, you can say that people make mutual improvements through their interactions.

Robert: (Speaking with the incorrect assumption that he physically met with the bicyclists from Qiqiha'er University...) You are saying that trust is important because you want to meet this person in the real world. When you first start communicating with them in the virtual world, you need to quickly establish a relationship of trust, is that it?

Student 6: On this type of platform, establishing a relationship of trust doesn't necessarily mean you have to meet up with the other party. Because of geographic distance or one's own economic limitations, it's impossible to say that just because you like someone that you must meet up with them. But it was indeed because we have these real world inconveniences, that you need this type of platform. The world's too big, shrinking it into this type of platform gives everyone the same opportunity.

Robert: Could you say this way..., just now this friend here said that the people you had been talking to yesterday said that they needed an anonymous environment in order to express their opinions. Could it be that in some places, that is necessary, while in others, such as platforms like Zhanzuo, more authenticity is needed, because these have a different function and value.

Student 7: I think you need both. Because some people have different interests, and some people indeed feel that there are too many limitations in real life. They just want to express their inner feelings, but expressing those feelings would perhaps have negative consequences for themselves or others, so they elect to express them anonymously. Say whatever you want, maybe that is the true meaning of "speaking out freely" (畅所欲言). But some people aren't willing to see this type of language. They think it's annoying, and according to their hobbies, they go to another space, somewhere with a real name system, where they don't see those things. So you can split these up into two spaces, both of which are necessary.

Student 8: I think the Real Name System has a bad aspect to it, for example on Zhanzuo, when people make postings, no one says things like "today I lost my temper because..., or today I had this bad thing happen..." Everyone only writes positive things, or shares positive experiences, things that are mutual beneficial between parties. You can say that everybody has a dark side to them. But no one shares that dark side on Zhanzuo. So in that sense it is not genuine. So that might be a bad part of it.

Student 9: I think that the Web has both virtual spaces and real spaces. Some people need the real spaces so they can show off something about themselves for others to appreciate. Whether it's online or offline, everyone needs that kind of "real space" where they can meet and communicate with "real people". For example, you can't say they are just going to express the best parts of themselves. Nobody only has beautiful things to say all the time. For example, you can communicate with others about life's frustrations on Zhanzuo. As your friends...as your real friends, people can help you find solutions to these kinds of problems. I am saying that just as we have a "real life" offline, people need "real lives" and "real interactions" online as well.

Student 10: I think real name registration is mutually beneficial to both the company [Zhanzuo] and the user. Because if some register their real information, when the user writes something, he is going to be careful with what he writes, as well as reduce and control the negative things he says. Because of this, when people make posts or visit other user profiles, they are careful with what they do. When you register your real name protects the safety of everyone on the site, and when other people register their real name it protects your safety as well. As this is preserved over long term, it will be better off for the site. From this perspective, the real name system is win-win for both sides.