

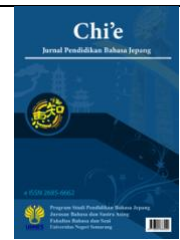


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Public Image and Private Life of Ai Hoshino in Oshi no Ko: A Dramaturgical Analysis

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Abstract

The idol phenomenon is a prominent aspect of modern popular culture, in which individuals are expected to present an idealized image that conforms to social expectations. In this context, impression management plays a central role in shaping an idol's public identity. This phenomenon is also represented in popular media, including the anime Oshi no Ko. This study examines the construction of public image and private life in the character Ai Hoshino through her performances in the front stage and backstage. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and non-participant observation, the data were collected from dialogues, monologues, and relevant scenes in the anime. The analysis draws on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, particularly the concepts of performance, front stage, and backstage. The findings show that the boundary between public image and private life is not simply blurred but actively constructed through complex social mechanisms. Through face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance, Ai Hoshino consistently maintains her public image as an idol. Overall, Oshi no Ko represents dramaturgical practices in Japanese idol culture through the deliberate construction and management of image.

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INTRODUCTION

The idol phenomenon has become a prominent part of modern popular culture. Idols are commonly positioned as figures to be admired and consumed through carefully constructed images of attractiveness, charm, and emotional accessibility (Chen & Skey, 2024). In this context, public identity is not simply expressed, but actively managed in accordance with social expectations attached to the idol role. As a result, the formation of an idol's image can be understood as a process of impression management rather than a direct reflection of private selfhood.

The construction of idol image is not limited to real-life entertainment practices. It is also represented and dramatized in popular media, including anime. One notable example is *Oshi no Ko*, a work that has attracted broad public attention for its portrayal of the entertainment industry and idol culture. Within this anime, the character Ai Hoshino is presented as an idol who appears cheerful, sweet, and sincere in public, while privately revealing a more complex and strategically controlled self. This contrast makes Ai Hoshino an important character for examining how idol identity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated across different social situations.

The contrast between public appearance and private self can be effectively examined through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1996) argues that social interaction can be understood as performance, in which individuals present themselves differently depending on the situation and audience. He distinguishes between the front stage, where individuals perform roles in ways that conform to social expectations, and the back stage, where those performances are prepared, adjusted, or temporarily set aside. Related concepts such as face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance further explain how social actors sustain a desired image, communicate symbolic meanings through appearance and behavior, and cooperate with others to maintain a consistent performance.

Previous studies have shown that dramaturgical theory is useful for analyzing fictional representations of self-presentation. Nissi and Azeharie (2022), for example, demonstrate how the character in *True Beauty* constructs an attractive social image in the front stage while revealing a different self in the back stage. Similarly, Rafifahtuzzahra et al. (2025) show that the main character in *Himouto! Umaru-chan* manages impressions by presenting different personas across social contexts. These studies confirm the relevance of dramaturgical analysis for fictional narratives, especially in relation to identity performance and impression management.

Studies related to *Oshi no Ko* have also begun to discuss the entertainment industry and idol culture represented in the anime. Carvalho et al. (2025) highlight how the work reflects the commodification of idols within the entertainment industry, while Lee (2023) discusses broader differences between Japanese and Korean idol industries, particularly in relation to training systems and the production of idol images. These studies are important in showing that idol identity is shaped by institutional and commercial structures. However, they do not specifically examine how the character of Ai Hoshino constructs and maintains her public image through concrete dramaturgical mechanisms within the narrative itself.

Thus, the existing literature reveals a gap in two respects. First, while previous research has discussed idol culture and entertainment industry dynamics in *Oshi no Ko*, limited attention has been given to the detailed representation of impression management through Goffman's dramaturgical concepts. Second, although earlier studies have applied dramaturgical analysis to fictional characters, few have focused specifically on idol representation in Japanese anime by examining the interplay of front stage, back stage, face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance in a single character. In other words, the specific mechanisms through which Ai Hoshino's idol

image is constructed across public and private domains remain underexplored.

ased on this gap, this study analyzes the construction of public image and private life in the character Ai Hoshino in *Oshi no Ko* through Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. It focuses on how Ai Hoshino performs different roles in front stage and back stage contexts, and how those performances are supported by face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance. By doing so, this study seeks to clarify how idol identity is represented not as a fixed essence, but as a socially managed and strategically maintained construction within the anime.

Research Question

How are public image and private life constructed in the character Ai Hoshino in *Oshi no Ko* through front stage and back stage performances?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. Such an approach is appropriate for producing descriptive data in the form of words, symbols, and dialogues derived from a cultural text (Moleong, 2014). It is particularly suitable for this study because the analysis is concerned with interpreting meanings, actions, and representations rather than measuring variables statistically.

The primary data source of this study is the anime *Oshi no Ko*, with specific attention to scenes involving the character Ai Hoshino. The units of analysis consist of dialogues, monologues, and narrative elements that represent Ai Hoshino's behavior, expressions, and interactions. These data are supported by selected scene excerpts that are relevant to the dramaturgical concepts applied in this study, namely front stage, back stage, face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance.

Data were collected through **non-participant observation**. In this technique, the researcher observed the anime without direct involvement in the events depicted, with attention to both language use and visual performance. The researcher systematically

watched the anime, identified scenes relevant to the research focus, and recorded dialogues and visual elements that reflect impression management practices. Non-participant observation is useful for examining communicative behavior without interfering with the interactional context (Suprihastiadi & Dirgandini, 2025, p. 264).

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. First, the collected data were categorized based on Goffman's dramaturgical concepts, including front stage, back stage, face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance. Next, the categorized data were interpreted to explain how Ai Hoshino constructs and manages her public image across different social contexts. Through this process, the study provides a systematic account of impression management as represented in the anime (Sugiyono, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the analysis using non-participant observation techniques, several findings reveal how the concepts of dramaturgical theory are applied by the character Ai Hoshino in constructing and maintaining both her public and private images. The data are classified into three categories—face work, sign vehicles, and team performance—with each category representing the application of front stage and backstage concepts.

A representative of front stage and backstage of face work concept example appears in the following exchange:

Figure 1. Ai makes a television appearance after a long hiatus (*Oshi no Ko*, Episode 1, 20:07–20:25).



Data 1

- MC :大丈夫？ちゃんとご飯食べてる？
Daijoubu? Chanto gohan tabeteru?
- MC :Are you okay? Have you been eating well?
- アイ :はい、いっぱい食べてます
hai, ippai tabetemasu
- Ai :Yes, I've been eating a lot!
- アイ :そうそう。ごはんと言え、こないだうちの子が。。。じゃなくてうちの子猫がね。休養中に飼い始めたんだけどアハハ
sou sou gohan to ieba, konaida uchi no ko ga.. janakute uchi no koneko dane. Kyuuyouchuu ni kai hajimetandakedo ahaha
- Ai :Oh, that reminds me! Speaking of food... the other day, my child—oh, I mean, my kitten! I started raising one while I was on hiatus, haha.
- MC :お。。
- MC :Oh..
- アイ :アハハなんかいつも変なこといちゃうアハハ
ahaha, nanka ittsumo henna koto ichauna ahaha
- Ai :Haha, I don't know why I always end up saying such weird things, haha!

The interview dialogue involving Ai Hoshino serves as a clear example of front stage performance within Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In this context, the public interview functions as a front stage, namely a social space in which an individual presents a self-image that has been adjusted to meet audience expectations.

Ai's statements such as “はい、いっぱい食べてます” and her accompanying laughter demonstrate a friendly, cheerful, and approachable demeanor—characteristics that are socially associated with the idol figure. When Ai nearly slips by saying “うちの子が,” a phrase that could create ambiguity between referring to a child or a pet, she immediately recognizes the potential risk to her public image. Her quick response—laughing and adding “アハハなんかいつも変なこといちゃうな”—functions as a

form of impression management aimed at maintaining her image during the interaction, and represents a clear example of face work.

Within Goffman's framework, this action illustrates Ai's ability to remain within her assigned role and prevent the moment from developing into a disruption of her social performance. By reframing the potential mistake as light humor, she ensures that the audience continues to perceive her positively and within normative boundaries. This highlights that front stage performance is not only concerned with what is presented, but also with how individuals correct themselves in real time in order to preserve the consistency of the performance.

Second, a representative of front stage and back stage of sign vehicles concept example appears in the following exchange:

Figure 2. The manager provides a commentary on the realities of the idol industry during Ai's performance (*Oshi no Ko*, Episode. 1, 21:09–21:35).



Data 2

社長 :この業界には、笑顔の裏に、嘘と打算が隠れている。放送に穴を空けてはならない。うちのアイはマジモンの嘘つきだぞ！

Kono gyōkai ni wa, egao no ura ni, uso to dasan ga kakurete iru. Hōsō ni ana o akete wa naranai. Uchi no Ai wa majimon no usotsuki da zo!

Sachou :In this industry, lies and cold calculations are hidden behind every smile. We cannot afford any mistakes in the broadcast. Our Ai... she is a real-deal liar!

The dialogue delivered by the company president (shachō/manager) clearly represents the back stage domain within Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The statement 「笑顔の裏に、嘘と打算が隠れている」 explicitly reveals that the idol's smile is not a spontaneous or authentic expression, but rather a deliberately constructed image shaped through calculation. This affirms that the idol image presented by Ai to the public is the result of planned impression management rather than a reflection of her genuine personality. Within Goffman's framework, this indicates that Ai's front stage performance is governed by an acute awareness of industry demands and audience expectations.

The sentence 「放送に穴を空けてはならない」 emphasizes the discipline of role performance and institutional control operating within the back stage. This dialogue is not intended for public consumption, but instead functions as an internal reminder that the performance must proceed without disruption. This demonstrates that the back stage also serves as a space for coordination and strategic reinforcement to ensure that front stage performances remain consistent and professional.

The most critical statement appears in 「うちのアイはマジモンの嘘つきだぞ」. This utterance directly exposes an aspect of Ai's identity that never appears in the public sphere. Referring to Ai as a “genuine liar” is not framed as a moral judgment, but rather as an acknowledgment of her exceptional ability to perform a social role flawlessly. In Goffman's terms, this suggests that Ai has fully internalized the idol role, to the extent that deception is no longer an anomaly but an integral component of competitive performance.

Thus, this dialogue functions as an explicit representation of the back stage, a space in which the realities of the idol industry are revealed without censorship, and where authentic identities and impression-management strategies are openly acknowledged. Ai Hoshino's highly strategic impression management demonstrates her conscious control over language, expression,

and emotional responses in order to maintain an idealized idol image before the public. This condition aligns fully with Goffman's concepts of front stage and face work, in which individuals act according to internalized social scripts to meet audience expectations during interaction.

Figure 3. Ai's performance that mesmerizes the audience (*Oshi no Ko*, Episode 1, 21:57 – 22:16).



Data 3

アクア:分かるなあ、狂わずにいられないんだ。あまりに強い光のまえで人はただ焦がされる。まるで火に群がる蛾みたいに吸い寄せられて、羽が焼け落ちると気が付いても、なお止まらない。僕って例外じゃない。

Wakaru naa, kuruwazu ni irarenai nda. Amari ni tsuyoi hikari no mae de hito wa tada kogasareru. Marude hi ni muragaru ga mitai ni suiyoserarete, hane ga yakeochiru to kigatsuitemo, nao tomarenai. Bokutte regaijanai

Aqua :I get it. She's enough to drive anyone mad. In the presence of a light so intense, people can't help but be scorched. They are drawn in like moths swarming to a flame; even if they realize their wings are burning away, they still can't stop. And I am no exception.

Aqua's dialogue describing the charm of

Ai Hoshino represents a strong illustration of a successful front stage performance within Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Aqua's statement 「あまりに強い光のまえで人はただ焦がされる」 and his depiction of the audience's inability to look away portray the overwhelming impact of Ai's idol performance in the public sphere.

Furthermore, Aqua's comparison 「まるで火に群がる蛾みたいに吸い寄せられて」 suggests that Ai's charisma is not merely the result of innate talent, but rather the outcome of

an exceptionally effective image construction. Within Goffman's framework, this indicates that Ai successfully delivers a performance that is consistent, convincing, and aligned with the audience's social expectations. The audience does not perceive Ai simply as an individual, but as an idealized symbol formed through controlled expressions, gestures, smiles, and a carefully managed stage aura.

Additionally, Aqua's acknowledgment that he himself is "not an exception" reinforces the idea that Ai's public image possesses a powerful persuasive force that affects nearly everyone exposed to her performance. This aligns with Goffman's assertion that the success of a front stage performance is measured by the extent to which the audience accepts the actor's definition of the situation without questioning it.

Figure 4. Ai's inner monologue during her stage performance (Oshi no Ko, Episode 1, 38:10–38:41).



Data 4

アイ : そんなこと言われたってな、私、プロだし。それよく分かんない。人間ぽくないのを求めているのはそっちじゃん？ 鏡みて、研究して、ミリ単位で調律。目の細め方口角全部打算。いつも一番喜んでもらえる笑顔をやっている。私は嘘で出来る。

Sonna koto iwareta tte na, watashi, puro da shi. Sore yoku wakannai. Ningen pokunai no o motometeru no wa socchi jan? Kagami mite, kenkyū shite, miri tan'i de chōritsu. Me no hosomekata kōkaku zenbu dasan. Itsumo ichiban yorokonde moraeru egao o yatteru. Watashi wa uso de dekiteru.

Ai : Even if you say that... I'm a professional, you know. I don't really get what you mean. Besides, weren't you the ones asking something impossible for human? I look in the mirror, I research, and I fine-tune

myself down to the millimeter. The way I squint my eyes, the angle of my lips—it's all calculated. I'm always performing the smile that will make people the happiest. I am made of lies.

Ai Hoshino's internal monologue constitutes an explicit representation of the back stage within Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In this context, although Ai is physically present on stage, her inner thoughts operate entirely within the logic of the back stage. The statement 「鏡みて、研究して、ミリ単位で調律」 reveals that Ai's front stage performance is the result of intensive technical preparation and precise calculation. Goffman describes the back stage as the space where actors prepare costumes, gestures, and expressions prior to performance. Ai's admission of rehearsing details such as narrowing her eyes and adjusting the corners of her mouth down to the "millimeter" confirms that the smiles and expressions visible to the public are not spontaneous, but engineered.

This condition corresponds with the concept of sign vehicles, wherein individuals employ specific tools to construct a particular image. The sentence 「目の細め方口角全部打算」 directly exposes the mechanism of impression management, as Ai consciously controls every aspect of her physical presentation to elicit specific emotional responses from the audience. Such awareness is a defining characteristic of the back stage, where the distance between one's personal self and social role is openly acknowledged.

The concluding statement 「私は嘘で出来てる」 represents the culmination of the dramaturgical analysis. This expression indicates that Ai's idol identity is entirely constructed through performance rather than rooted in personal authenticity. In Goffman's terms, this signifies an extreme internalization of role performance, in which the boundary between the authentic self and the stage persona becomes blurred. Notably, this confession exists solely within the backstage and is never communicated to the audience.

Thus, the dialogue above confirms that Ai Hoshino's presence on the front stage does not merely involve self-presentation, but the domination of social interaction through a highly structured performance. The anime further demonstrates that the success of Ai's public image construction is dependent on the existence of a back stage that relies on communicative tools saturated with calculation, pressure, and a conscious awareness of constructed falsehood. This highlights how sign vehicles function as primary instruments in the construction of an idol's public image within *Oshi no Ko*.

Third, a representative of front stage and backstage of team performance concept example appears in the following exchange:

Figure 5. Ai's first meeting with the film director (*Oshi no Ko*, Episode 1, 41:25–41:37).



Data 5

- アイ :どうかしました監督?
Dō kashimashita, kantoku?
- AI :What is it, Director?
- 監督 :いあ、別に。この子供?
Iya, betsuni. Kono kodomo?
- Director :It's nothing. Whose children are these?
- ミヤコ :あー私の子なんです
Aa, watashi no ko nan desu.
- Miyako :Ah, they're mine.
- 監督 :マネージャーが子連れて現場にね
Manējā ga ko tsurete genba ni ne.
- Director :I can't believe a manager would actually bring their children to the workplace.

The conversation between Ai, the director, and Miyako on the filming set represents a front stage practice involving multiple actors within a single unit of social performance. In Goffman's dramaturgical theory, front stage performances are not always carried out by individuals in isolation; rather, they often take the form of team

performances, in which several actors cooperate to maintain the definition of the situation expected by the audience. The filming location functions as a front stage region because it is a professional space governed by work norms, hierarchy, and industry ethics. Within this context, Ai displays polite and professional behavior through the utterance 「どうかしました監督?」, which signals her compliance with her role as an idol. This response reinforces Ai's image as a figure who is aware of her position and the norms of interaction within a public work environment.

When the director questions the presence of the children with 「この子供?」, the potential exposure of Ai's secret—that she has twin children—begins to surface. At this critical moment, Miyako immediately assumes her role as part of the team performance by stating 「私の子なんです」. This statement functions to neutralize the situation and prevent disruption to Ai's public image. Through this collective action, the team successfully preserves the front stage illusion and protects the established definition of the situation.

Figure 6. Discussion between Ai and her manager about her upcoming activities (*Oshi no Ko*, Episode 1, 18:45–19:00).



Data 6

- 社長 :役所の手続きも買い物も全部子ども連れは NG だ。どうにもならない火急の用事がある際は俺たちの子供を預かっているという設定で出ること!
- Yakusho no tetsuzuki mo kaimono mo zenbu kodomo-zure wa NG da. Dō ni mo naranai kakyū no yōji ga aru sai wa oretachi no*

kodomo o azukatte iru to iu settei de deru koto!

Manager :You must never bring those children with you when filing government paperwork or when you're out shopping. If something unexpected comes up, you tell them you're just babysitting my kids!

アイ :えーめんどくさいね ルビー
Ē, mendokusai ne. Rubī

Ai :Eh? That sounds like a hassle. Ruby
The conversation between Ai Hoshino and her manager constitutes a clear representation of the back stage within Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. In this context, the back stage serves as a space shielded from public surveillance, where social actors formulate strategies, establish rules, and discuss aspects of performance that must remain hidden from the audience. This dialogue is not intended for public consumption, but instead functions as internal coordination aimed at maintaining the stability of Ai's image as an idol.

Managerial instructions such as 「子ども連れはNGだ」 and 「俺たちの子供を預かっていう設定で出ること」 demonstrate systematic planning of the public narrative that must be upheld. Within Goffman's framework, this constitutes a form of impression management occurring in the back stage, where deception is not interpreted as a moral deviation, but rather as a professional instrument used to sustain front stage credibility. Ai's identity as a young, childless idol is an image that must be protected in accordance with industry interests.

This dialogue also illustrates the practice of team performance. Ai and her management form a dramaturgical team that cooperatively safeguards the same secret. Ai's response 「めんどくさいね」 reveals that awareness of the burdens of performance can only be expressed in the back stage. Such a complaint would be impossible in the front stage, as it would undermine the public image being constructed. This moment underscores the clear separation between Ai's personal self and her public persona as an idol.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the construction of Ai Hoshino's public image in *Oshi no Ko* is grounded in the distinction between front stage and back stage performances as explained through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Based on the qualitative descriptive analysis of dialogues, monologues, and visual scenes, the findings indicate that Ai's image as a cheerful, sincere, and ideal idol is not presented as something natural or spontaneous, but as the result of deliberate and structured impression management.

In the front stage, Ai consistently performs in ways that correspond to the social expectations attached to the idol role. Her use of face-work is evident in moments of immediate self-correction, especially when she manages potentially disruptive situations in order to protect her public image. At the same time, sign vehicles such as facial expression, gesture, speech style, and stage presence function as key means through which her idealized identity is communicated and made convincing to the audience. In contrast, the back stage reveals the constructed nature of that image. Through internal monologue and private conversations with management, the anime shows that Ai's public persona is sustained through calculation, preparation, and conscious role control.

The findings also demonstrate that the maintenance of Ai's public image is not solely an individual effort. Through team performance, the anime portrays image construction as a collaborative process involving Ai and those around her, particularly in concealing aspects of her private life that could disrupt her idol persona. In this sense, the stability of her public identity depends not only on her own performance, but also on coordinated support from others who help preserve the same social definition of the situation.

Overall, this study concludes that *Oshi no Ko* represents the idol world as a social space in which public image is continuously produced, protected, and regulated through performance. The boundary between public image and private

life is therefore not simply unclear, but actively constructed through face-work, sign vehicles, and team performance across front stage and back stage settings. These findings confirm the usefulness of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective for analyzing how identity and impression management are represented in anime, particularly in narratives centered on the entertainment industry.

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