

# A Study on Self presentation in the Use of Emoji by College Students from the Perspective of Dramaturgical Perspective

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**Abstract:** With the rise of social media, the types and meanings of emojis have become increasingly diverse. This study, from the perspective of Dramaturgical Theory, delves into the phenomenon of college students presenting themselves through emojis in online communication. The study analyzed the behavior and motivation of college students using emoticons, revealed the important role of emoticons in self presentation, and pointed out some problems that incorrect use of emoticons may lead to.

**Keywords:** Emojis; Self presentation; Dramaturgical Theory; College student; Social media

## Introduction

In the information age, with the rise of online socializing, online chatting creates a virtual space for individuals who cannot engage in face-to-face chatting. Text represents language, while emoticons replace facial expressions. In the process of communication, emoticons play a supplementary role in content, effectively expressing the emotions of both parties and shaping the image of individuals. Contemporary college students use emojis very frequently when chatting on WeChat, and there is even a phenomenon where it is difficult to carry out conversations without using emojis. Regarding the research on emojis, some scholars currently define WeChat as a performance front stage exploring the characteristics and limiting factors of WeChat emojis as a performance symbol (Dong Jiangyan, 2016). Others believe that emojis can not only be used for communication, but also as a way for users to express themselves through the metaphorical characteristics of emojis (Zhao Zechen, 2023). Research on emojis in China has only focused on analyzing the characteristics, existing problems, and coping strategies of emojis. There is relatively little analysis on the behavior of individuals using emojis for self presentation.

Why are emojis so popular among college students and what do they mean for them. A study on college students' use of emoticons for self-presentation, interpreted through the relationship between the front stage and back stage from the perspective of dramaturgy, through the relationship between the front stage and back stage, and explore the behavior of college students using emoticons, as well as their positive and negative impacts.

## 1. Conceptual definition

### 1.1 Dramaturgical Theory

Dramaturgical Theory was proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman, which compares life to drama, where daily life is a stage, and interacting with others is performing on stage. In specific scenes and spaces, people play various roles in order to create a positive image in the minds of others.

This kind of performance is divided into two areas, the front and the back. The front is the performance area, which is used for self performance. The back is not seen by the audience, but a rest and adjustment area. It hides the id, and does not have to meet the values and norms recognized by the society (Xi Boyu, 2023). The Dramaturgical Theory was originally used to study interpersonal relationships in real life, but under the environment of the development of network technology, it has a new interpretation in the Internet virtual space.

### 1.2 Emoji Pack

Emoji first appeared in emails sent by Scott E. Fahlman to friends. He first used the smiling symbol “: -)” composed of characters, which marked the birth of emojis. However, with the development of time and technology, emojis have undergone richer changes in both function and expression.

Yue Gailing mentioned that emoticons extend human expressions into cyberspace through the objective self “Me” and the subjective self “I” relationship (Yue Gailing et al., 2023). Therefore, this article believes that emoticons, as a way of self presentation, can help individuals better express emotions and more conveniently present the roles they want to play.

### 1.3 Self presentation

“Self presentation” is a form of self-expression, which was first proposed by Goffman. Its core idea is that in the process of social interaction, people will express themselves in a predetermined way in order to shape their image. Goffman further proposed that “the effort an individual makes to build a favorable impression of themselves in front of others is the “self presentation” of their daily life (Xi Boyu, 2023). The “front stage” and “back stage” proposed by the theory of dramaturgical drama correspond exactly to “I” and “Me”. “Me” is hidden in the background and not known to the audience, while “I” is exhibited in the front stage to construct the individual’s ideal image through specific performances. This article argues that in WeChat chatting, both parties are performers, and performers interact with each other through the “front stage” to construct and present the image of “I”.

## 2. Front stage: Self presentation behavior of college students using emojis

Individuals are unable to fully understand the other person's true image and feelings during chatting. The virtual space of the internet divides people's interactions into clear "front stage" and "back stage", completely isolating others from prying into the "back stage". The information used in the front stage, such as text, images, voice, facial expressions, etc., shapes the identity image that individuals use externally, helps them present themselves, express their emotions externally, and expects to gain a sense of identity and belonging in the group.

### 2.1 Emotional expression

At the front desk, individuals can fully express their emotions and attitudes by using emojis. Albert Mehrabian once proposed that the entire expression of information is composed of 7% intonation, 38% voice, and 55% facial expressions. When online chatting loses the advantage of face-to-face communication, emoticons can be used to supplement the missing facial expression information during the communication process between both parties.

Emoji packs have visibility when used for self-image expression (Dong Jiangyan, 2016). When expressing emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger in a chat, relying solely on text is difficult for the other party to fully perceive. In this case, using emoticons can visualize one's own expressions and emotions online, allowing emotions to be fully expressed. This is also one of the reasons why people are willing to use emojis during conversations.

### 2.2 Identity recognition

In addition to expressing emotions, individuals can also shape a unique self-image by selecting emoticons that match their identity and interests, and gain identity recognition through self performance.

Applying the theory of drama simulation to interpersonal communication on the internet, WeChat chat boxes are viewed as a stage, where both parties are spectators and actors, participating in interactive performances on stage. At this time, the image of emoticons will serve as the third party that users themselves or chat parties observe together (Dong Jiangyan, 2016). People use emoticons to express their emotions through emoticons, hoping to reach a consensus with others. Therefore, emoticons, as a symbol, have meaning after being successfully interpreted by users in performance interactions, and users can gain recognition from others or groups at this moment. When netizens use emojis with the element of "King of Glory" to communicate with others, the group who understand the game naturally understands this type of emojis, and both parties achieve mutual identity through self presentation.

## 3. Back stage: Reasons for college students using emojis

In Goffman's dramaturgical theory, backstage refers to the private space where individuals prepare and adjust to present their best selves in the front stage. The behavior of college students using emoticons is a process of background preparation and self adjustment in a virtual social space. When people choose emojis in the background to shape their self-image in the front stage this behavior often reflects their inner world and pursuit of social image.

### 3.1 Psychological level

In 1974, Elihu Katz proposed the theory of "uses and gratifications approach", which views the audience as individuals with specific needs and the process of media exposure as the process of using media based on specific needs and motivations, in order to satisfy those needs. For example, when feeling sad, a simple "I am very sad" sentence is not enough to express one's expression and emotions at this moment, while emoticons can specifically express the intended meaning. Researchers have used experimental methods to interrupt the use of emoticons by users for 48 hours. The analysis shows that the multi-dimensional expression of emoticons can accurately convey information and shape personal character and image; Beneficial for alleviating awkwardness and creating a good conversation atmosphere; There are also functions for gaming and entertainment. Therefore, the use of emojis by college students is not only a satisfaction of communication needs, but also a reflection of their inner emotions.

### 3.2 Social level

Online communication provides college students with a free and relaxed communication environment, where they can present their desired image in the front stage and better integrate into the new social environment. The Zhou Aihua team used practical investigation methods to find that the use of emoticons can enhance the perception of interpersonal distance between communication partners. In the process of using emojis, they are not casual. They will use corresponding emojis according to different situations and communication targets to achieve the best communication effect. This targeted usage helps them establish various in-depth connections with different populations. (Zhou Aihua, 2023) For example, in the unfamiliar social environment of university, college students need some time to adapt to the new social environment. They choose emoticons based on the situation and objects to showcase their personality and identity, establish a universally recognized social image, and thus establish social relationships and integrate into the online social environment.

## 4. The behavioral impact of self presentation

Emoji are tools for expressing emotions and important carriers for individuals to present themselves. But the existence of anything has two sides and needs to be viewed dialectically. Therefore, by examining the relationship between the "I" and the "Me" in the front stage and back stage, we delve into the behavior and impact of college students using emoticons for self-presentation.

#### 4.1 Positive effect: Coordination and unity between the “I” and the “Me”

As a nonverbal expression symbol, emoticons often carry specific cultural connotations and values. College students tend to satisfy their emotional expression needs by selecting and using emoticons that match their own context, showcasing the information and emotions that individuals want to express; When encountering awkward and speechless situations, college students tend to use humorous or cute emojis to alleviate the tense atmosphere. This communication method can alleviate tense emotions and make communication smoother; And by using specific emojis, college students can showcase their personality and identity, gradually finding people in the same circle and gaining identity recognition.

#### 4.2 Negative effect: separation between the “I” and the “Me”

As the content of emojis becomes richer, some emojis with regional, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds may lead to differences in interpretation. From the perspective of both parties in communication, this can lead to inconsistent evaluations and feedback between oneself and the outside world, resulting in unsatisfactory performance of the “Me”. From a personal perspective, excessive reliance on front stage performances and the use of emoticons for expression may hinder the language organization ability of college students, leading to a decline in this ability and a rigid social relationship. Furthermore, if individuals overly focus on external evaluations and feedback, indulging in playing the roles loved by others, they will overlook their personal growth in real life. This can subtly mislead the value judgments of college students, which is not conducive to building healthy relationships. These phenomena are undoubtedly issues that need attention, and college students need to deeply reflect on them.

## 5. Conclusion

The behavior of college students using emojis for self presentation is also a reflection of the interaction and influence between When the subjective self and the objective self are separated, emoticons can meet the emotional expression needs, convey emotions more intuitively and vividly, and achieve identity recognition. When the “I” and “Me” are separated from each other, emojis also have negative effects such as rigid social relationships and distorted values. Therefore, college students should enhance their ability to identify information, judge and analyze the information conveyed by emoticons, and avoid misunderstandings or overuse. At the same time, college students should not neglect the use and exercise of their written language expression abilities. They should regard emoticons as a tool for expression, rather than making them dominant. Through the dual expression of text and emoticons, individuals can achieve self presentation.

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