

# Self-Presentation of College Students on Social Media: Take Weibo as An Example

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**Abstract.** With the development of social networking services (SNS), people are accustomed to sharing their lives and presenting themselves on social media. Different from the traditional ways of face-to-face communication, social media platforms are becoming the performance stage for people nowadays. The study adopts Goffman's dramaturgical theory as the theoretical framework, and looks into the self-presentation of college students on Weibo, a quite popular social media platform among young people in China. The study aims to explore whether individuals present different personas on the front stage and backstage, and to figure out the reasons behind them. Adopting the qualitative method, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight research participants. After organizing the interview data for further analysis, it is concluded that most of them tend to have different personalities online, compared to those in real life. The reasons for the difference include audience segregation, privacy considerations, and conformity, which will bring some inspiration to SNS developers.

**Keywords:** Self-presentation; dramaturgical theory; different personas.

## 1. Introduction

In the Web 2.0 era, communication technologies such as social networking services (SNS) provide unprecedented opportunities for users to manage and control their online self-presentation. Users are able to record their daily lives and share their interests on social media platforms anytime and anywhere, turning their daily lives into events for others to watch.

Weibo is currently one of the most dynamic social networking sites in China, with a large and active user base. According to Weibo's Q3 2023 earnings report, by September 2023, Weibo had 605 million monthly active users and 260 million daily active users, and its user base is dominated by young people in their twenties [1]. Different from face-to-face interactions in the past, Weibo has become a new stage for young people in China to present themselves, especially college students, and the act of self-presentation online has become of great concern in their everyday lives.

According to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, individuals always selectively present their daily lives to others, in order to create an ideal image of self [2]. So, whether the personas they display on Weibo are the same as their real selves is worth discussing. Looking into the self-presentation of college students on Weibo, this research aims to figure out the different persona's users present on social media compared to those in real life, as well as the reasons behind the difference.

Self-presentation originated from the symbolic interactionism theory, which was proposed by Mead from the Chicago School at the end of the 19th century. According to Mead, social interactions help people to form their identities, and the self is a dynamic process that combines the "I" and the "me" [3]. The "I" is the subjective self and the driving force of all the things in the self, while the object self "me" is the image of self-created in other people's eyes.

In the 1960s, based on the symbolic interactionism theory, Goffman proposed the concept of self-presentation for the first time in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He compared daily life to a dramatic stage; people perform in front and backstage to realize their role presets. Front is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance [2]. Performers use certain performance skills and impression management strategies in the front stage to convey the value that has been recognized by society. While on the backstage cannot be seen by the audience, performers can temporarily rest and adjust their

performance state, and do not have to cater to those socially recognized values [2]. This dramaturgical theory creates a set of new terms, and systematizes the interactions between individuals, introducing a brand-new perspective for exploring the self-presentation of individuals.

In the Internet age, the way of people's daily interactions has experienced great change. Different from traditional face-to-face interpersonal interaction, mobile Internet has reorganized the spatial environment of people's social communication, and the way individuals present themselves is constantly taking on new features.

In communication studies, more and more scholars have begun to explore self-presentation on social media platforms based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Papacharissi Z. argues that personal home pages present a new channel for mass communication, and individuals are able to present a more multi-mediated self and create an ideal self-image on social media [4]. Ming J. and Yan Z. put forward the concept of "Weibo performance", which regards to the process in which users consciously select the content to present on Weibo in order to idealize their self-image; while Hogan believes that the self-presentation online has changed from a stage performance to an "exhibition" of self [5,6].

However, although a large number of studies of self-presentation on social media platforms have been done at home and abroad, there are still some research gaps. First, while some scholars are aware that individuals may present different personalities online and offline, most of the studies only scratched the surface of what are the differences and their performance strategies but failed to further analyze the reasons behind them. Moreover, previous studies mainly focus on social media platforms such as Facebook, WeChat and Tiktok, while less research has been done on Weibo, which is popular among young people in China. Additionally, since most studies tend to focus on the influencers and their performance strategies on popular social platforms, there are still some research gaps on the self-presentation of ordinary people in daily life, such as college students.

Therefore, the research is to fill these research gaps and to provide further clarity into the reasons why college students tend to present different selves on social media compared to real-life ones. Moreover, in terms of practical significance, the researcher hopes to figure out the real needs of college students when using social media, and thus provide practical and effective advice for SNS developers.

In order to figure out the different personalities that college students present online and offline and the reasons behind them, the specific research questions are as follows.

Q1: What are the characteristics of their self-presentation in the front stage?

Q2: What impression management strategies do they use?

Q3: Are there any differences between their front stage and backstage? Why do they perform differently?

## 2. Method

The research mainly adopts a semi-structured interview method. An interview outline was given to the interviewees in advance. When conducting the interviews, the researcher first asked questions according to the guideline, and then extended the questions further based on the interviewees' previous answers. After the interviews, the interview data was organized for further analysis, in order to have a deeper insight into the interviewees' true self in backstage.

### 2.1. Respondents

The snowball sampling method is adopted when selecting the research subjects. Since the research focuses on Weibo, which is applied more in China, the author mainly chose college students in China aged 18-22 to be the research subjects. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Basic information of respondents

Name	Gender	Age	Location	College
WYK	Female	21	Jiangsu	NNU
SJY	Female	22	Beijing	PKU
SJW	Female	20	Beijing	UIBE
ZNN	Male	22	Beijing	CUC
WYP	Male	18	Beijing	CUC
YLN	Female	22	Beijing	CUC
WHS	Male	23	Edinburgh	Edin.
JL	Female	20	Guangdong	JNU

## 2.2. Process of Operation

The author devised the interview questions roughly based on the logic of “front stage - performance strategy - backstage”, according to dramaturgical theory and the research questions proposed above. After doing some pretests before the formal interviews, some of the interview questions were modified, in order to get all the information required for the research.

When conducting the formal interviews, the author adopted the way of face-to-face interviews, and had a 20-minute interview with each person. The interviews were recorded with the interviewee’s permission. After that, an interview transcript and an interview information summary table were made according to the recording, in order to facilitate further analysis, exploring the interviewees’ different performances between online and offline and the reasons behind them. The researcher also browsed the interviewees’ Weibo accounts to look at their posts, in order to explore further as secondary data.

## 3. Result and Discussion

After doing some data analysis according to the interview transcript, the result can be divided into the following four parts: characteristics of the front stage, impression management strategies, the difference between the front stage and backstage, and the possible reasons behind it.

### 3.1. Characteristics of Front Stage

In order to study the characteristics of an individual’s self-presentation on Weibo, it is necessary to look into the content characteristics of their posts, as Weibo serves as a performance stage for them.

As Table 2 shows, almost all of the respondents’ posts include their memorable experiences in life, such as hanging out with their friends, traveling experiences, personal achievements, and other highlight moments. Moreover, some of them like to express some personal emotions on Weibo. For example, they will post some feelings or thoughts that they are too embarrassed to express in reality. In addition, some of the respondents may post their beautiful pictures and things related to star chasing and pay attention to some hot news. There are also a few people engaging in political discussions and expressing their political opinions. But it is worth noting that they tend to selectively talk about political issues, and often choose safer topics.

**Table 2.** Types of content the respondents post on Weibo.

Type	Frequency
Memorable Experiences	7
Emotional Expression	4
Beautiful Pictures of Self	3
Star Chasing	3
News Event	3
Political Opinions	2

According to word frequency statistics based on interviewees' answers to their online persona question (see Table 3), the author found that their online personalities are mainly positive, like passionate, optimistic and life-loving. It seems that individuals tend to create a positive image of self-online, while there are also some opposite situations, as a few respondents said that they are more aggressive and tend to "go crazy" on social media.

**Table 3.** Respondents' online personalities

Personas	Frequency
Positive	4
Interesting	3
Reserved	3
Aggressive	2
Sensitive	2
Other...	1

### 3.2. Impression Management Strategy

Impression management is a goal-directed conscious or unconscious process in which people attempt to influence other people's perceptions of a person, object, or event by regulating and controlling information in social interaction [7]. Combining Goffman's dramaturgical theory, and materials like the interview data and respondents' Weibo content, the author summarizes their impression management strategies as idealization and mystification.

Idealization is a type of "socialized" performance strategy, which means people shape and adjust their performances to conform to the expectations of the audience and the society in which they are performed. [2]. Using an idealization performance strategy, individuals tend to post things that are in line with socially recognized values. They tend to show a carefully designed ideal self, in order to amplify their perfect side. For example, a respondent said:

*I always post positive aspects and emphasize on the brighter side of life. (WYP)*

*When it comes to politics, I always pick safer and more positive topics. (WYK)*

By emphasizing on the bright side and constructing a positive media image, users believe that they are more likely to be recognized by society; thus, others will not have negative impressions of them.

Another impression management strategy is mystification. Mystification is a particular strategy that may be employed to keep the observers at a sense of awe [7]. Individuals just selectively post relevant content according to their own needs, so that the audience may have a strong sense of mystery about them. A respondent mentioned that:

*I don't post much and just show a little about myself.... For some updates about my daily life, I'll set it to be visible only to my friends. (WHS)*

*I often express my opinions on some hot issues, but I don't like to post too much about my daily life. Browsing my home page, people who don't know me may think I'm a thoughtful guy, but they may find it quite difficult to get close to my life. (ZNN)*

In this way, the audience may be more curious about the blogger. Thus, it's an effective strategy for them to attract followers.

### 3.3. Difference Between Front Stage and Back Stage

Of the eight respondents, only two insisted that they were quite real on social media and there's no difference between their front stage and backstage, while the rest respondents admit that they indeed display different personas online.

As Table 4 shows, the difference can be roughly divided into the following three types. The first is being positive online while having more complicated emotions in real life. This kind of individuals carefully design an ideal self that is positive, fulfilling and optimistic, while in actual, they tend to have more complicated characteristics, and are always more sensitive and multifaceted. The second type is being emotionally unstable online while emotionally stable in real life. This kind of individual

mentioned that although they are more friendly and sober in real life, they tend to magnify their happiness and sadness online; they think Weibo is a good platform for them to express their true feelings and to “go crazy”. Moreover, the third is being reserved online while actually outgoing in real life. This kind of individual doesn’t like to post much or just write very few words in their post, while actually, they are quite talkative and outgoing in real life.

**Table 4.** Difference personas online and offline

	Online	Offline
Positive vs Complex	Positive, fulfilling, interesting	Sensitive, sometimes negative
	Optimistic, positive, beautiful	Sensitive, care about current affairs and society
Emotionally unstable vs Emotionally stable	Enthusiastic and unrestrained, magnify happiness or sadness	Emotionally stable
	Aggressive, emotionally unstable	Peace and love, more friendly, nice, emotionally stable
Reserved vs Outgoing	sensitive, reserved, living a fancy life	outgoing, happy
	Reserved, thoughtful	Smart, talkative, humorous

A quite interesting fact is, that while some people always stay positive online but sensitive in real life, some others tend to go crazy and be aggressive online but more peaceful and positive in real life, which represents very opposite situations. In order to explain this distinction, the reasons why they have different personas online and offline should be figured out first.

### 3.4. Possible Causes

#### 3.4.1 Audience Segregation

The first possible cause is audience segregation. It means that when people present themselves to someone, they don’t want others to disturb them without warning. Those uninvited guests may break their established performance and leave them in a state of panic [2]. However, on social media platforms, users have no control over their audience at all; they are dealing with the so-called “imaginary audience” [8]. Therefore, in order to avoid negative evaluations from others, people always hide their negative emotions. They tend to do some gating behaviors, selectively present themselves, and try to avoid too much real and complex emotional expression [9]. For example, when asked why she likes to establish a positive media image online, one respondent said:

*I have a lot of friends on Weibo who only have superficial relationships with me in real life, so I just choose to post the positive side online in order not to damage my image. (WYK)*

However, another respondent mentioned that she doesn’t have any real-life friends on Weibo. Therefore, as for her, the Weibo platform itself has already created audience segregation, and thus, she is willing to reveal more complicated and real emotions on Weibo. She said:

*I need a space that won’t disturb others to release my desire for expression. And I don’t have any real-life friends on Weibo. (SJW)*

Therefore, the perception of audience segregation leads to the difference in users’ personalities displayed online and offline, as well as the difference between the opposite types mentioned above.

#### 3.4.2 Privacy

The second cause is people’s concerns about privacy. Concerns about the privacy impact of new technologies are nothing new, since technological developments have led to the emergence of an “information society” capable of gathering, storing and disseminating increasing amounts of data about individuals [10]. More and more users have expressed concerns about the protection of their personal information on social media platforms. For example, some of the respondents said:

*I am concerned about privacy disclosure because of too much self-disclosure on my social media account. (JL)*

*I want to post a lot of things on Weibo, but I'm afraid that someone will secretly monitor my home page, and I'm afraid that other people will know my privacy and secrets. (WHS)*

*I used to post private or intimate updates that were only visible to my friends, but once there was something wrong with Weibo... I found my private post still got so many views, and I learned that there is no privacy on social media platforms. Since then, I have rarely revealed my true thoughts on Weibo. (WYP)*

Therefore, although the respondents are quite outgoing and talkative in real life, they tend to construct a reserved and somewhat mysterious image online, in order not to expose too much privacy. One of the respondents even deleted her posts from time to time, in an effort to better protect her personal information.

### 3.4.3 Conformity

Another cause is conformity. In other words, people always want to follow the trend or follow their friends to post their lives online, so they will not look different in their friend circle. For example, one respondent said:

*I see most of my friends are posting their colorful lives on Weibo, and I want to follow them and show the positive and fancy side of my life. (WYK)*

Therefore, individuals like to imitate what other people post online, in order to better integrate into their friend circles, even if the media image they present online is quite different from themselves in real life.

## 3.5. Discussion

According to the research, the boundary between front stage and backstage is actually becoming blurred. As people are sharing more and more on social media, sometimes it can lead to oversharing. Thus, the trend is that the individual backstage is getting closer and closer to the front stage.

In addition, since individual's different personas online and offline have a strong relationship to privacy considerations, increased privacy concerns in the future will bring new changes to self-presentation on social media platforms. In October 2023, Weibo is trying to implement a new policy called "real name in the front stage". That is, the user's real name, occupation and IP location will be displayed on their Weibo profile. Many people object to it and express concerns about privacy. In the future, if the policy is fully promoted, individual's self-presentation on social platforms will inevitably change due to privacy considerations.

## 4. Conclusion

To summarize, most people like to show their positive side and carefully design an ideal self, while there are also some opposite situations. They will apply idealization and mystification strategies for impression management. Most people tend to have different personas between their front stage and backstage, and the reasons behind this may relate to audience segregation, privacy and conformity.

In terms of theoretical significance, this research fills the gaps in previous research on self-presentation in the age of social media. The research has an in-depth insight into users' psychology and figures out the reasons why users show different personalities online and offline, which can provide some inspiration for SNS developers. In terms of practical significance, in order to have users actively present themselves on social platforms, SNS developers should improve the privacy protection function as much as possible, as well as the "group visibility" function, if taking audience segregation into consideration.

However, there are still some limitations of the research, which can be further improved in future research. First, the research fails to take "teams", the concept that Goffman highlighted, into consideration. Future research could look into the function of teams in users' self-presentation, such as users' engagement and presentation in Weibo group chats or Weibo Chaohua. Moreover, during the interviews, a large number of respondents mentioned that their personas on Weibo are quite

different, even on different social media platforms. Future research could further compare the difference from different platforms, in order to draw a more complete conclusion.

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