

A Study on the Construction of Self-Identity in WeChat Status Updates from the Perspective of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Yaxin Xiao

*Department of Culture and Communication, University of International Relations, Beijing, China
18291653688@163.com*

Abstract. With the diversification of social media, WeChat status has become a significant channel for young people to document their daily life. This study adopts a literature review and online ethnography, based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, to investigate users' self-presentation and identity construction on WeChat status. By analyzing a number of WeChat status updates collected from November 2025 to January 2026, this paper examines how the media features of WeChat status shape users' self-presentation strategies and the underlying logic of digital identity construction. The findings indicate that the immediacy, semi-privacy and weak interaction of WeChat status provide users with a low-pressure expressive space. Users flexibly adjust their self-presentation between intimate social relations and real-life pressure through strategies including circle adaptation, dynamic expression and permission management. WeChat status can be regarded as a transitional zone between the front stage and back stage in daily digital interaction, which mirrors the genuine needs of contemporary young people for self-exploration and emotional expression in the digital era.

Keywords: goffman, Dramaturgical Theory, WeChat Status, Self-Identity, Digital Social Interaction

1. Introduction

In the past two years, more and more WeChat users have begun to frequently utilize the "status" function: some users express their current mood through brief textual descriptions, some record life moments with a casual photo, and some choose to make it visible only to specific friends, sharing those private and fragmented feelings that they don't want to be made public. In the real-life scenario where social relationships among acquaintances are constantly intertwined, people often hope to express their true emotions while also fearing being overly evaluated or misunderstood. The instantaneity and timeliness, fragmentation and lightness, weak interactivity and low feedback pressure, as well as semi-privacy and circle limitation of WeChat status, precisely provide a relatively safe space for this contradictory expression need.

The distinction between the "front stage" and the "back stage" proposed by Goffman is a classic perspective originally used to explain social interaction: on the "front stage", performers need to maintain their role images in accordance with others' expectations; on the "back stage", individuals

can temporarily shed their roles and show the side that is difficult to display on the front stage [1]. However, in digital platforms, this boundary has gradually become blurred. The WeChat Moments is often carefully managed by users as a relatively stable "front stage", where each post is repeatedly considered to present an idealized self-image; in contrast, WeChat Status is neither a fully public front stage nor a completely private back stage, but an expression space between the two.

This raises new academic questions: when self-presentation shifts from the long-term shaping of WeChat Moments to the instant expression of WeChat Status, does the way of individual identity construction change accordingly? How do the media characteristics of WeChat Status affect users' self-performance strategies? Based on these questions, this paper combines the methods of literature research and netnography, selects 200 pieces of WeChat Status content posted by different users from November 10, 2025 to January 10, 2026 as samples, analyzes its media characteristics, and discusses how young groups adjust themselves between the pressure of acquaintance social interaction and the expression of true emotions. It is hoped to present the real appearance of this daily media practice at the empirical level, and provide some new thinking for understanding the applicability of Dramaturgical Theory in the semi-private social context at the theoretical level.

2. Literature review

In the sociological tradition, discussions on self-identity have a long history. Cooley's looking-glass self theory holds that "people are mirrors to each other, reflecting one another" [2], and individuals form self-cognition by imagining others' evaluations; Mead's symbolic interactionism further points out that a "symbol" is an "expressive gesture" [3], the self is a product of social interaction, and individuals understand their own roles in interaction. On this basis, Goffman explains self-presentation from a dramaturgical perspective. Goffman emphasizes that "a team is a collection of individuals who, through close cooperation with each other, maintain a specific definition of the situation" [1], and also points out that "all of us are participants in team activities" [1]. In his view, the reason why performers use the personal front stage is not entirely to present the ideal self, but because their appearance and behavior need to adapt to a wider range of social scenarios. Therefore, the Dramaturgical Theory has been widely applied in the research of online social interaction.

In the field of social media research, self-presentation and impression management have always been important themes. Scholars generally believe that social platforms provide individuals with tools to shape social images, and at the same time bring identity pressure and comparison anxiety. At present, relevant research generally focuses on several aspects. First, studies on college student groups have found that they generally attach importance to impression management in online social interaction. For example, some studies point out that girls score significantly higher than boys in defensive impression management strategies [1]; college students are more inclined to positive self-presentation on Douyin, which is positively correlated with subjective well-being [4]; on WeChat Moments, college students obtain recognition by showing their lives and emotions, but are also prone to self-loss and identity confusion [5]. It can be seen that in the acquaintance social environment, self-presentation can not only bring emotional value, but also cause psychological pressure. Second, from the perspective of self-identity construction, users usually adopt "idealized performance strategy", "mystification performance strategy" and "remedial performance strategy" in information dissemination on WeChat Moments to present the idealized self-image in their hearts [6]; however, when the "front stage" performance is too different from the real self, it is easy to cause confusion in self-cognition and social alienation [7]; when facing the "teams" composed of different friends, individuals need to constantly adjust their expression strategies. Once impression management is unbalanced and context collapse occurs [8], it may lead to confusion in the definition

of the situation and even affect interpersonal relationships. Third, in comparative studies of different platforms, scholars have found that anonymous Weibo accounts can alleviate the pressure of front stage performance and enable users to present the "back stage" self more truly [9], but the lack of norms may also bring attacks and disorder; the self-presentation of Rednote bloggers is jointly affected by traffic, business and personal needs, with obvious role stratification [10]. These studies show from different angles that platform structure will affect individuals' ways of self-presentation.

To sum up, existing research mostly focuses on public or semi-public social platforms such as Weibo, Douyin and WeChat Moments, and pays little attention to the short-visible, weakly interactive and semi-private expression space of WeChat Status. Compared with the long-term display and careful management of WeChat Moments, WeChat Status is more close to daily emotional records and instant expressions, and its self-presentation mode may be more flexible and closer to real life. Therefore, further examining how WeChat Status affects individuals' self-performance and self-identity construction is also helpful to understand how young groups find new ways of expression.

3. Analysis and results

This study conducted a systematic observation of 200 pieces of WeChat Status content, as shown in Table 1. On the whole, the expression forms of WeChat Status are relatively scattered but with a clear structure: pure text, picture/video, and music + text account for 65% in total; in terms of emotional orientation, positive accounts for 40%, negative 30% and neutral 30%, with no significant difference; the interaction orientation is mainly self-narration with "no clear implication", and the permission setting is based on 50% being "visible to all friends", with multiple options such as "visible only to oneself" and "visible to some friends", which helps users carry out personalized self-presentation and dynamic self-identity construction.

Table 1. Categorization of the systematic observation content of WeChat Status (N=200)

Classification dimension	Type description	Typical examples	Proportion
Expression for	Pure text	Description with text only, e.g., "Keep it up today", "Slacking off"	25%
	Picture/Video	Pictures or short videos, e.g., showing food, scenery photos, sharing travel short videos	20%
	Music + text	Songs + copywriting, e.g., "Sunny + Missing her", "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies + Go for it!"	20%
	Emoji	Emojis or emoji combinations only, e.g., happy emoji, sad emoji	15%
	Location information	Positioning the current location, e.g., "In a café", "The Bund, Shanghai"	10%
	Configured topic	Associating with hot topics, e.g., "Workers' Daily Life", "Where to Go on Weekends"	10%
Emotional orientation	Positive	Expressing happiness, hope, etc., e.g., "Super happy today!", "Got a gift ~"	40%
	Negative	Expressing tiredness, irritability, etc., e.g., "So tired today", "Don't want to go to work"	30%
	Neutral	No obvious emotional tendency, e.g., "On the way", "Working hard", "Binge-watching a drama"	30%

Table 1. (continued)

Interaction orientation	No clear implication	Simple self-narration of status, e.g., "Having a cup of milk tea" "Nice weather today"	70%
	With clear implication	With interaction guidance, e.g., "Anyone want to join?", "Need comfort"	30%
Permission setting	Visible to all friends	Daily sharing, public updates, e.g., "Went to an art exhibition today"	50%
	Visible only to oneself	Private mood, unwilling to be noticed by others, e.g., "A little down, want to be alone"	20%
	Visible to some friends	Only visible to specific friend groups, e.g., "Visible only to family: Home safe"	15%
	Invisible to specific friends	Blocking specific friends, e.g., "Invisible to leaders: Slacking off"	15%

3.1. Analysis of the media characteristics of WeChat Status

3.1.1. Instantaneity and timeliness

Among the 200 cases observed, about 60% are immediate records of real-time emotions, including 40% positive emotional expressions (e.g., "Got a gift ~") and 30% negative emotional confessions (e.g., "So tired today", "Don't want to go to work"). The instantaneity of these contents is reflected in users' immediate capture of their current status without long-term deliberation or screening. For example, "Slacking off" (pure text, accounting for 25%) posted by users during overtime breaks and "On the way" (neutral emotion, accounting for 30%) shared on the commute are direct marks of the current scene and mood.

Compared with WeChat Moments, the 24-hour expiration mechanism of WeChat Status reduces users' concerns about the long-term impact of content, allowing them to share current emotions, behaviors or sudden thoughts at any time. For example, in the picture/video status accounting for 20%, some users casually take photos of sunset on the street with the caption "So beautiful" to record life. This instantaneity makes WeChat Status more like a "current self-record". Through frequent and short-term content updates, users present their emotions and life fragments as a constantly changing process, rather than a relatively fixed image left after screening like WeChat Moments.

3.1.2. Fragmentation and lightness

The sample observation shows that the fragmentation and lightness of WeChat Status are obvious: 25% of the status are short sentences (e.g., "Go for it!", "Binge-watching a drama"), 15% express emotions only with emojis, 20% are combinations of "music + short copywriting", pictures/videos account for 20%, and location information about 10%. Most contents have very low creation costs, which can often be completed in a few seconds, and sometimes even no text is needed—only a photo or a location can express the current emotion or situation. For example, some users post "Workers' Daily Life + emoji" to summarize the day's status with topics and symbols; others share Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies with the sentence "Go for it!" to express their attitudes through songs. Although these contents are short, they can clearly convey emotions and situations.

Lightweight expression lowers the posting threshold, making users who are not good at long expressions or have limited time willing to update their status, which also explains the phenomenon

that the proportions of different forms are relatively close (between 10% and 25%). From this point of view, WeChat Status helps users express themselves through scattered symbols and gradually form an understanding of their own life rhythm and emotional changes. This simple way of expression itself has become a part of self-identity construction.

3.1.3. Weak interactivity and low feedback pressure

In the observation, about 70% of WeChat Status are simple self-narration with no clear interaction implication, such as "Having a cup of milk tea" and "Nice weather today", and only 30% have interaction guidance such as "Anyone want to join?" and "Need comfort". Different from the strong interaction mode of "liking + commenting" on WeChat Moments, WeChat Status has no public comment section or like list, and most of them are weak interaction forms visible to both parties. For example, the negative emotional status accounting for 30% (e.g., "Don't bother me", "Being withdrawn") indicates that users do not have to worry too much about others' evaluations or questions when posting; the status visible only to oneself accounting for 20% (e.g., "Need to calm down") is more like emotional sorting rather than social expression. Contents that are not very "positive", such as "Want to go crazy" and "I quit" (pure text, accounting for 25%), can also be posted naturally without deliberate modification. It can be seen that weak interactivity makes WeChat Status get rid of social pressure to a certain extent, and the low feedback environment makes users more willing to update their status frequently and express their true feelings more easily, thus forming a more continuous and subtle self-presentation process.

3.1.4. Semi-privacy and circle limitation

The visible scope of WeChat Status inherits the acquaintance social attribute of WeChat, which is visible to all friends by default (accounting for 50%), and also supports permission settings such as "visible to some friends", "invisible to specific friends" and "visible only to oneself", forming a semi-private and controllable public expression scenario.

From the sample data, different content types show obvious differences in permission settings. Among the negative emotional contents accounting for 30% (e.g., "A little down, want to be alone"), about 60% choose "visible only to oneself" or "invisible to colleagues/leaders"; contents involving personal relationships (e.g., "Home safe") are mostly set to "visible to some friends" (about 15%); and for status with a teasing meaning (e.g., "Slacking off"), more than half choose to block leaders or colleagues. On the contrary, positive emotional contents accounting for 40% (e.g., "Went to an art exhibition today") and neutral status accounting for 30% (e.g., location sharing) are mostly set to "visible to all friends", and users will actively adjust the visible scope according to the nature of the content. It can be seen that WeChat Status has become an expression space with controllable boundaries to a certain extent, a "controllable self-display platform": sharing daily life with family, expressing emotions with friends, and keeping restrained with colleagues. In this way, users try to avoid conflicts between the expectations of different social circles, make self-presentation more in line with specific scenarios, and maintain a relatively stable self-image in multiple relationships.

3.2. Strategies for self-identity construction in WeChat Status

3.2.1. Adjusting self-presentation according to social circles

Goffman points out that "the performer's appearance and behavior must adapt to more scenarios", and "when an individual maintains the same social front stage in different scenarios, he will tend to

choose expressive symbols that can be used in a wider range of scenarios" [1]. The semi-privacy and circle limitation characteristics of WeChat Status provide a digital carrier for this principle of "situational performance". In the work scenario, the content posted by users to all friends is mostly neutral expressions, such as "Starting work mode", to adapt to different circles such as colleagues and relatives and friends, and maintain a relatively safe front stage image; while in holidays or private scenarios, the expression of high emotions increases significantly, such as "Holidays are awesome" and "Stealing a moment of leisure from a busy schedule", and the visible scope is mostly narrowed down to family or friends. The differential mode of association proposed by Fei Xiaotong [11] emphasizes the hierarchical structure of social relations in China, and the circle limitation of WeChat Status exactly reflects this way of expressing relations from close to distant. In the sample, the higher the emotional exposure of the content, the higher the proportion of restricted visibility. Essentially, it is to build a tacit "team" through circle screening, aiming to "maintain a specific impression and avoid performance collapse" [1].

3.2.2. Improving self-narration through dynamic updates

Goffman holds that "people will constantly adopt preventive measures to avoid these embarrassments, and also adopt remedial measures to make up for those damaging events that fail to be avoided" [1]. The 24-hour timeliness feature of WeChat Status breaks the content logic of phased precipitation in WeChat Moments, and provides users with a procedural and continuous space for self-performance. For example, a user posts "Starting work", "Surviving on coffee", "Proposal approved" and "Collapsing on the sofa" in a row in one day, which fully records the flow of self-status and emotional changes in a day from work to rest. Similar cases are common in the sample, indicating that this process-based self-narration gets rid of the pursuit of a perfect static image by traditional social platforms, makes self-identity return to the real dynamic growth process, and conforms to the core logic of continuous performance in the Dramaturgical Theory.

3.2.3. Controlling self-boundaries with permission settings

The permission setting function of WeChat Status provides users with a tool for "boundary control", which is essentially a specific practice of "maintaining scenario adaptability" in the Dramaturgical Theory. In the sample, positive contents are mostly public, while negative emotions or private information tend to be restricted in visibility. For example, "Happy today" and "Sharing a good song" are mostly visible to all friends; contents involving complaints or privacy are often set to be visible to some friends or only to oneself. The way of boundary control allows users to find a balance between self-expression and privacy protection. By reasonably controlling the scope and degree of information disclosure, it ensures that each self-presentation can conform to specific scenarios, reduces the interference of different social circles on self-identity, and also makes users feel more secure in self-expression.

4. Discussion

4.1. The extensive significance of WeChat Status to the Dramaturgical Theory

In most scenarios, Weibo is more like a "public display platform", where users need to maintain an idealized image facing an uncertain audience; WeChat Moments is a relatively fixed "front stage" in the acquaintance society, where users need to maintain a consistent self-image among relatives, friends, colleagues and other relationships; while WeChat Status is a "changeable semi-private

display platform". The 24-hour timeliness and precise permission settings make "limited public display of private status" a normal state. Private emotions and casual status that were traditionally "private" can be transformed into "relaxed display content" visible to a limited number of people, breaking the strict boundary between public and private, and being closer to Goffman's ideal scenario of "small group collaborative display", forming a new form of "flexible display scenario". It can be seen that under the condition of digital media, the boundary between the "front stage" and the "back stage" has become blurred and a continuous process that can be adjusted according to the audience and scenario. WeChat Status is a realistic extension of the Dramaturgical Theory in this change.

From the perspective of a wider range of social media practices, WeChat Status is not an isolated phenomenon. Similar functions have long appeared on foreign platforms, such as Instagram Reels, Facebook Stories and Snapchat Stories; in domestic platforms, QQ Dynamic Posts, Douyin "Post Daily" and Kuaishou "Post Instant" also provide similar lightweight expression spaces. In comparison, WeChat Status presents a more obvious semi-private expression function in the acquaintance social environment. From this perspective, WeChat Status is not only a part of the global social media trend of "temporary expression", but also has the characteristics of the local acquaintance network structure, which also provides cross-cultural empirical materials for the re-understanding of the "front stage-back stage" relationship in the Dramaturgical Theory.

4.2. The unique expression of realizing self-identity in WeChat Status

Most of the users in the sample are aged 18-25, among whom 62% update their status more than twice a week, indicating that WeChat Status has become a common way of expression for young people. In the collection of netnographic materials, the author also found that most users mentioned that "posting Status is easier than posting on WeChat Moments". At present, young groups are facing multiple real-life pressures: in the workplace, the average weekly working hours of workers nationwide reach 51.7 hours, with obvious KPI competition and promotion pressure; in terms of childbearing, the national birth rate dropped to 5.63‰ in 2025, the cost of raising children in first-tier cities is relatively high, women's income shrinks by 14.7% and promotion opportunities drop by 28.3% after childbirth; in addition, with about 230 million single people and a marriage rate of 4.3%, the choice of marriage and childbearing itself has become a heavy burden. The "life ranking list" constructed by social media has further amplified identity anxiety, putting young people in an expression dilemma—they hope to express their emotions but worry about being labeled, and such concerns are particularly obvious in the social relations of acquaintances. These real-life pressures do not directly lead to the use of WeChat Status, but form the social background of young people's expression anxiety.

The short-term timeliness and limited visibility of WeChat Status help resolve this contradiction. Young people can convey workplace emotions and attitudes towards marriage and childbearing through lightweight symbols such as "Working hard" and "Buddhist life", which not only avoids social conflicts caused by complex narration, but also does not have to worry about temporary expressions being solidified into long-term labels. This flexible form of expression meets the needs of individuals for temporary identity construction in the liquid modernity theory, reflecting the in-depth transformation of contemporary young people from fixed image shaping to dynamic self-identity under real-life pressure.

Essentially, the "low-commitment social space" constructed by WeChat Status enables young people to complete the fragmented presentation of self-identity in a low-cost and highly flexible

way, becoming an important carrier for Chinese young people to cope with survival pressure and realize unique self-expression in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the emergence of WeChat Status provides young people with a softer way of expression. With the help of this way of expression, individuals are not only responding to others, but also re-recognizing themselves. Perhaps these short-lived status will eventually disappear, but what they leave behind are tiny footnotes of individuals in the torrent of the times, and evidence that ordinary people live earnestly and feel themselves earnestly.

Of course, this study still has some limitations. The sample selection scope is narrow and the research is mainly qualitative, so the universality of the conclusions and the validity of the research lack sufficient support. In the future, combined with larger-scale quantitative research and cross-cultural comparison, we can further explore the relationship between digital social interaction and self-identity in different social contexts. It is expected to continue to understand the subtle and important interaction processes between people and society, and between individuals and others in more specific and real media practices.

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