

# Intergenerational Alienation of Emoji Used in Social Contexts: A Case Study of the Wechat Platform Based on Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

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## ABSTRACT

With the advent of Web 3.0 era, the contemporary youth group represented by college students grew up in the environment of rapid development of the network society, accustomed to social media as the main social platform of social media, and used social media to build and disseminate the unique subculture of the youth group. They are well aware of the importance of the use of picture symbols such as Emoji in virtual society, and have developed a unique community code with the help of Emoji. This obvious intergenerational difference in social culture is particularly evident on WeChat, a social media platform. In particular, the alienated use of "smile" Emoji by youth groups in online virtual social networking is a good entry point for observing intergenerational social cultural differences and commonalities. Despite the efforts of youth groups to deconstruct existing social patterns and practices with new technological power and media environments, they have to compromise in the real social process, constrained by social patterns such as "Working Consensus" and "Impression Management". The alienated use of "smile" Emoji is an important example to interpret the contradictory social culture of youth groups. This study will intervene in WeChat, a special Chinese virtual social field, and use Goffman's dramaturgical theory to interpret and analyze the cultural motivation behind the alienated use of "smile" Emoji by young groups.

**Keywords:** social media platform, Working Consensus, Impression Management, dramaturgical theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As an important social media in the digital age, Emoji's emergence and prevalence are almost synchronized with the development of the Internet age. The Internet age has advanced from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0. The arrival of Web 2.0 means that Internet users' interaction has become an important channel for information circulation, while Web 3.0 gives more value recognition and status wealth to creative labor, which makes the cultural landscape of the network society richer and more colorful. In the Web 3.0 era, while deepening the breakthrough of time and space limitations, it also emphasizes cross-cultural and profit-making. The main trend of the evolution of the Internet era is the transfer from "offline" to "online", and the virtualization of social activities is one of the achievements. With the popularity of intelligent mobile terminals and digital media, in order to facilitate people's communication and contact in the network society, major social media have appeared one after

another, and almost achieved full coverage in the short term. Social media is the product of the virtualization of social activities, the emergence and popularization of a large number of social media in turn deepen the degree of the virtualization of social activities. The popularity of Emojis largely depends on the two carriers of social media and intelligent terminals. From the initial emoticon to more colorful and diverse kaomoji, and then to Emojis adopted by the two Internet giants of apple and Google, this process is accompanied by the gradual maturity of online social networking in the Internet age. When Emojis are incorporated into Unicode coding system, it has almost become a popular coding in line with international standards. As an important symbol used in cross language, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural communication in the network society, Emojis not only have practical value such as symbolism and communication, but also has great cultural value.

In the virtual social environment, pictures and words, as the main language forms, replace the commonly used body language and spoken language in daily social communication. According to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, people usually need to rely on other people's facial expressions and other "personal front-stage" and "performance errors" to judge the context and authenticity of their discourse in daily social life in the real world. However, in online social activities, people cannot observe the expression and posture of individuals' unconscious relatively directly and objectively, which is not conducive to the smooth progress of social activities. Thin words cannot carry the rich and diverse emotional colors of individuals. The absence of many elements such as individual mood, appearance and behavior leads to the incompleteness of communication context, resulting in various misunderstandings and ambiguities. The emergence of Emojis is to make up for this incompleteness to a great extent. The use of "little yellow face" with various expressions in Emojis in online social networking obviously implies the speaker's expression and emotion. In relevant interviews, most respondents also realized that "Emojis have emotions" [1]. In Goffman's dramaturgical theory, when people realize that what is more credible and reliable than obvious expression in the process of social interaction is the expression of implied meaning, in order to ensure the smooth progress of social interaction, people usually achieve the "Working Consensus" of social interaction by controlling the real unintentional expression or turning a blind eye to each other's "performance errors". That is, both parties can obtain a more comfortable social process and satisfactory social results. It can be seen that in offline social networking, it is very important to clarify the "personal front-stage" of others and yourself for personal impression management. However, in online social networking, due to the falseness and lack of real "personal front-stage", people must replace them with other nonverbal symbols. Emoji is a nonverbal symbol used to replace the "facial expression" in the "personal front-stage". In the process of use, different users will have different usage habits because of the differences of user identity and social background. Therefore, in addition to intuitively replacing part of the role of facial expressions in social interaction, the selection and use of Emojis may also imply other social information in the user's "personal front-stage". Many studies have shown that people's digital footprints on social platforms can be used to infer their age and gender [2]. Emoji, as one of the digital footprints, also implies the discourse style and expression characteristics of "performers". For example, Oleszkiewicz and his partners found that young users use more emoticons than older users to post their status on Facebook. Jones et al (2020) [3] and Prada et al (2018) [4]'s studies showed that women use emoticons more frequently than men. For these two conclusions,

considerable parts of the academic results have given proof, although a small number of researchers disagree.

Compared with the gender differences in the use of Emojis on social platforms, the research results on the age differences in the use of Emojis on social platforms are relatively uniform. Most scholars believe that age is an important factor affecting the frequency of using Emojis in online social networking, which is more obvious in social media with wide coverage and high degree of user self-expression. Wide coverage means that the social media has users of all ages. A high degree of user self-expression indicates that the user's "personal front-stage" is relatively fully and comprehensively exposed, which is more conducive to observing the "performances" made by users to maintain the "Working Consensus". Most studies on self-presentation in the Internet age focus on mainstream social platforms in the United States such as Facebook and WhatsApp, thus ignoring some new cultural phenomena in other ethnic local social media. WeChat, China's national social media, has dual functions of transmitting timely information and publishing status posts. Therefore, it is an ideal field for observing individual social performance behavior. In addition, there is a special phenomenon in the specific scene of WeChat social networking, that is, users of different ages have different understanding and use of emoticons such as "smile", followed by some obvious "performance collapse". Many related essays have paid attention to the cultural research value behind this phenomenon. For example, in his 2021 essay on "Emoji social" [1], Yao explored the rules and modes of young people using Emojis for impression management through in-depth interviews and grounded theoretical analysis, which involved the discrimination of the differences between young and older users' understanding and use of some Emojis in WeChat. However, this essay only makes a shallow analysis of the phenomenon that "with the growth of age, the number of Emojis used by individuals in online social networking decreases accordingly" [1], and its research focus is to describe this phenomenon in detail. For the social motivation behind this phenomenon, this essay only hastily summarizes it as a more basic consensus that "age is negatively correlated with willingness to use technology" [1], and does not discuss the differences in social focus and social demands behind the intergenerational differences in Emoji use in WeChat chat field. Another research achievement that also pays attention to this special phenomenon is Hu Mengqi and Ye zhangya's differential reading of Emoji expression in social networks -- Thinking Based on Stuart Hall's coding and decoding theory [5], but this essay also does not explain the cultural reason for this phenomenon, that is "What kind of cultural environment makes young people and older people have different ways of understanding the same symbol?" In addition, the

writing and Research on this unique social networking phenomenon in China are insufficient, and there are almost no corresponding research results to explore the cultural motivation behind it. Based on this, with the help of Goffman's pseudo drama theory, this essay will take the differences in the understanding and use of Emoji between young users and older users on WeChat platform in private instant messaging as the main research object, and try to explore the intergenerational differences in the cognition and presentation of individual self-image in the Chinese context represented by WeChat.

## **2. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### ***2.1. Migration of social focus: from real world to virtual world***

Young people use Emojis more frequently on WeChat platforms than older people, they can hardly print a line of words without emoticons as emotional aids. Because in their opinion, using Emojis is not only to ensure the effective transmission of emotional information, but also a unique social etiquette of online virtual social networking. Just as in real life, people usually habitually smile when making friends with strangers or greeting people, the opening of chatting with others in WeChat usually needs to be supplemented by an Emoji with positive meaning. Hu and Ye conducted a random sampling questionnaire survey on Emoji users of different ages in China, and made statistics and analysis on the data results. The results showed that there were significant differences in the interpretation and use of Emoji expression among different age groups: compared with the group aged 11-34, the group aged 35-65 had lower frequency and willingness to use Emojis [5]. The Research Report on Chinese virtual social activity done by Liu Wenjie et al also confirms this through relevant sample collection and data analysis [6]. Up to now, the academic community has basically formed a consensus on the intergenerational differences in the use of Emojis, but the analysis of the social and cultural causes of these differences still stays on the surface, and does not pay attention to some special phenomena and similarities between young groups and older groups in the use of Emojis.

Compared with the older generation, the new generation of young people grow up in an era when the virtual world gradually rises and even gradually threatens the real world. Before they get in touch with the real society and learn how to deal with daily interpersonal relationship in real life, they can put on a mask and be comfortable in the online world. Compared with their parents, young people's social life takes place more in virtual space than in real space, which largely affects their habits and ways of recognizing and

transmitting information. When WeChat and other social media have not appeared and become the main platform for social networking in people's daily life, people usually socialize according to the principles of "performance" and "impression management" of daily life reality put forward by Goffman. In that era, the "front-stage" and "back-stage" of social activities were concrete and visible. For example, compared with the living room, the bedroom is a "back-stage". As long as the house owner passes through and closes a real door, he or she can enter an entity space that no longer needs to play the corresponding role. However, the virtual network world not only provides convenience for people's successful "performance", but also destroys the concrete "door" separating the "front-stage" and "back-stage" in reality. On social media, the boundary between "front-stage" and "back-stage" of individual and team performances gradually become blurred and even begins to disappear. Because "the Internet has memory", all the content presented on the social platform cannot be really erased. From a pessimistic point of view, this means that there is no real "back-stage" in social activities in the Internet era, all individual "intentional expressions" (performances) and "unintentional expressions" will be recorded, and the record of "performance errors" is at risk of being watched by others at any time. Based on this risk, people doubt each other's "self" at any time on social media. In order to obtain truth and prevent being cheated, a set of social rules unique to social media is born, that is, the fuzziness and uncertainty of expression. Only by blurring all their expressions on social media can they better ensure the safety and zero mistakes of their "performances". However, in the process of delivering timely messages, the clarity of entity messages is the premise to ensure smooth communication, only the changes to additional contents (such as Emoji) are harmless. Therefore, Emoji has become an important tool to weaken the sharpness of expression and enhance the fuzziness of expression. Nevertheless, for the elderly who have been socializing in the real world for a long time, their existing social habits are difficult to change quickly, and it is also difficult for them to understand and adapt to the new social rules on the social platform in a short time.

Although the expression methods of the two generations in online social activities are greatly different due to the influence of their cultural background, fundamentally, behind their different social expression habits and patterns is a set of the same and relatively stable social culture system, that is, the need for "Working Consensus". According to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, in social interaction, what really requires an individual is to master enough expression samples so that he can more or less "fill in" and control any role he may get.[7] The so-called "expression samples" are many performance paradigms with universality and consensus, which are not only followed

by individuals, but also held by various performance teams. These performance paradigms make it possible to maintain the “Working Consensus” of the performance in various unfamiliar or familiar scenes. Whether online or offline, computer-mediated communication or face-to-face communication, the “Working Consensus” of the performance is an important purpose of social activities. “Working Consensus” refers to the performer’s performance purpose in the dramaturgical theory, that is, maintain a specific situation definition.[7] This kind of “Working Consensus” is usually more significantly reflected in the “performance” of one group of team members to another group of team members. As two groups of teams, the young group and the old group have different ways of discourse when they socialize with each other or other team members, but their internal members have reached a broad agreement on social culture. Just as on the WeChat platform, the elderly usually directly interprets and use the “smile” Emoji as a smile expressing positive meaning, while the young people represented by Chinese college students re-decode this Emoji as negative meanings such as “Satire” and “speechless” within their team. The two teams have formed their own different network social characteristics because of their different social focus, but they coincide with the same social law because of the same social purpose.

## ***2.2. Development of community Code: intergenerational differences in social hierarchy***

On the other hand, the older generation who are less affected by Internet culture and western culture usually have obtained a higher social status than young people, which also has an impact on their social expression. According to Halliday’s theory that “language is a social symbol”, “people realize social structure, affirm their status and role, and establish and transmit shared value system and knowledge system in their daily language exchange process.”[8] In his dramaturgical theory, Goffman regards status as a behavior pattern that must be revealed in daily performance: Identity, status and social status are not material things that are owned and then displayed; they are an appropriate mode of behavior, consistent from beginning to end, polished and clearly expressed. Whether the performance is relaxed or clumsy, conscious or unconscious, cunning or sincere, it is still necessary things that must be performed and played must be idealized.[7] This shows that no matter whether the individual is aware of it or not, and no matter what the individual’s real will is, the individual’s cultural and social background such as his identity and status will always be revealed implicitly or obviously in daily social activities. The difference is that when people consciously express these contents, they are “performing”, while unintentional expression is

considered as “performance error” Therefore, individuals with different social status will always show different intentional and unintentional expressions in social activities, while individuals with the same social status will naturally share more similar social culture, so as to form a social group.

Communities with different social status share different “community codes” due to their different social cultures, that is, the social performances between communities will show the development and use of different homogeneous symbols. Because of the different social status obtained, the older group and the young group usually have different emphasis in the impression management in the network. The older group usually takes shaping its own relatively authoritative, stable and reliable image as the social demand and purpose, while the young group is more inclined to show its dynamic and flexible side. There is a general view that imposing restrictions on communication, that is, maintaining social distance, provides a way to arouse and maintain awe among the audience.[7] older people are more familiar with the rules and rituals of real society than young people, they will unconsciously apply these established real social habits to social activities in the virtual world. The use of Emoji is a way to shorten social distance, users usually use Emoji in order to create an impression that it is easy to get close. This is inconsistent with the social expectations of many older people with relatively high social status. They may pay more attention to social status in social networking, resulting in their inability to be approachable when online socializing with individuals with lower social status, and always show humility and caution when online communicating with individuals with higher social status. Bella and Ogiermann’s research findings in 2019 show that in Greek society, older groups adhere to the concept of hierarchy, while younger groups pay more attention to equality.[9] In contemporary China, which is obviously influenced by western and internet culture, the social activities of young groups and older groups on WeChat also reflect the distinction of this cultural concept. In addition to different cultural concepts, the possibility and proficiency of technology implementation also affect the choices of Emoji in social interaction between the two groups. Compared to the elderly, young people are better at manipulating Emoji such controllability on social media, and are more interested in and enthusiastic about multimodal expression.[10] These different social styles formed due to different social experiences and social backgrounds inter-generationally, and the specific reflection of different social cultures and social styles is the development and use of homogeneous symbols within different social groups.

Different communities share similar social experience and social background within them, so as to obtain a set of similar behavior and discourse norms. In

virtual society, different social groups usually create and share some private encoding and decoding methods. The most extreme example is the “slang” in some social groups, such as criminal gang. However, in fact, these “codes” used to block other groups and identify members of self-group widely exist in people’s daily social life. A more obvious embodiment in virtual social activities is the alienated decoding and encoding of “smile” Emoji in WeChat. The formation process of the so-called internal “code” is to decode some ordinary symbols into special meanings, then popularize such special meanings and decoding methods in a group, and finally affect the coding and decoding of other symbols in the group. This kind of group can be regarded as what Goffman calls “team”, which is any group of individuals who cooperate in performing a single routine procedure.[7] Its internal members cooperate to maintain a specific impression, and use power or agreement as a means to achieve their goals.[7] As mentioned above, due to the cultural influence and the different social status of the main members, the young group and the elderly group have different spatial emphasis and mode preferences in social activities, and have formed their own unique social culture. Therefore, they have the characteristics of drama classes.

For the team formed by the elderly, straightforward command is a more familiar kind of expression. According to the research of Liu, Li and Ren, when making requests to people with higher social status than themselves, older participants will use more direct social strategies and fewer indirect social strategies than younger participants.[6] When online socializing with people with lower social status than themselves, the direct social strategy of the elderly is more obvious. The corresponding survey results show that when making a request to people with low social status, the young group uses 120 external modifiers, while the older group uses only 50 external modifiers. In terms of address, older groups prefer to use “last name” to address each other when they make a request to interlocutors with lower social status on WeChat, while younger groups use “first name” more frequently. [6] When addressing each other, the first name sounds more casual and friendly than the last name, because it suggests the equality of both parties in the conversation. In the Chinese context, older people with higher social status usually add the word “little” before others’ surnames when addressing young people with lower social status, which reflects a dominant posture in social communication and implies the hierarchical differences between different communities. From this, we can also see the social cultural differences between the two teams, that is, under the influence of western culture and Internet culture, the hierarchical concept of China’s new generation of young groups has gradually weakened, and they no longer habitually make aggressive requests to people with low social status. [6]

The differences of expression caused by different social status have a great impact on the understanding of specific Emoji by older and younger groups. In the view of the elderly, “smile” Emoji is used to express its “picture meaning” (i.e., the initial coding meaning) in WeChat social conversation, while young people creatively dig out the indirect connotation of this Emoji and promote it into the internal code of their social team. In Internet social interaction, young people are more willing to spend time hiding their real ideas than the elders who mainly use direct social communication for the purpose of communication efficiency. In consideration of “Working Consensus” and the need for social impression management, young people have to use “smile” and other seemingly positive Emoji to hide their negative emotions such as “dissatisfaction” when socializing with some internal members of their own team and members of other teams. This is a new way for the members of a fresh team to implement the laws of traditional social performance.

### **3. BEHIND “SMILE” EMOJI ALIENATION: ALTERNATIVE EXPRESSION OF YOUTH SUBCULTURE**

It can be seen that the alienated decoding of “smile” Emoji by youth groups in WeChat social networking actually represents a transfer rather than resolution of negative emotions. In order to maintain the surface “Working Consensus” of the virtual social activities, when the social object is not their own acquaintance, people usually do not choose to use Emojis to express negative emotions such as “angry”, “impatient” and “speechless”, but will selectively ignore the performance errors of the other party that offend themselves. This is a common habitual choice for the elderly, but in the view of some members of the young group, the negative emotions brought by the other party’s performance errors should not be tolerated silently, but should be given corresponding negative emotional feedback. At the same time, considering social efficiency and basic interpersonal relationships, young people cannot use the directly corresponding Emoji to express their dissatisfaction. Instead, they choose the special Emojis such as “smile” as emotional carriers, alienating its initial positive performance reference to negative reference. With the gradual spread of such usage within the youth group, the alienated use of “smile” Emoji has become a silent form of social resistance widely recognized within the youth team, and the special value culture of the youth group and the era background behind it have gradually surfaced.

The rise of Emoji in social media such as WeChat is, in a sense, the product of the “picture reading era”. The arrival of the “picture reading era” means that the image logic transforms and reshapes the writing logic. Images have become an important factor affecting people’s

reading and understanding of screen content. Compared with unmodified words, images have more interpretable space. Therefore, in the process of timely message exchanges on WeChat, the use of Emoji image sometimes not only cannot make the expressed emotions clearer, but will even damage the accuracy of emotional interpretation. This phenomenon different from the original intention of Emoji is gradually produced with the increase of the circulation time of it, and mainly occurs in the social process of youth groups. The alienated use of “smile” Emoji is one of the major phenomena. Young people are the main users of WeChat, compared with the elderly, they are more familiar with many functions of WeChat chat platform. When young people have not yet entered society, their main social objects are their peers. The initial alienated use of “smile” Emoji occurred among young college students, so it is obvious that the use of Emoji, which has a significant impact on WeChat social networking of other social groups, is closely related to the social culture of young college students.

Although young people, like the elderly, practice the social purpose of “Working Consensus” and the social way of “personal and team impression management” in social practice, the former is more willing and good at pursuing the diversification of social forms than the latter. Compared with the older groups who are content with the fixed traditional “social rules”, the younger groups are more willing to take risks and take a more rebellious attitude to challenge and deconstruct the traditional social authority. The need to form a new cultural group and build new internal discourse is a manifestation of youth subculture in the Internet era. Reflective thinking and subversive resistance to mainstream culture is one of the characteristics of youth subculture, and the alienated interpretation and use of some Emoji represented by “smile” is a kind of gentle resistance of youth groups exposed on social media to Chinese traditional social ways.

The use of Emojis in virtual social communication is originally to assist and facilitate the transmission of information, that is, to enable the other party to judge the text connotation through the contextual information provided by Emojis, which is to make up for the lack of “personal front-stage” in virtual social communication. However, in the process of increasingly extensive use, especially in the specific cultural environment of China, some Emojis (represented by “smile” Emoji) have been re-decoded and encoded by the youth team, this phenomenon not only cannot promote the generation of unified context, but dispels the original context in the process of Emojis’ circulation. Especially in intergenerational social interaction, the collapse of “Working Consensus” and the negative effect of hindering the exchange of meanings are most obvious.

The overall image of “smile” Emoji in WeChat is: look down with eyes, and lips close and rise. This image feature is in sharp contrast to “bared teeth” Emoji (eyes narrowed and bent downward, lips cracked to reveal a row of teeth). It can be said that the Emoji image of “smile” better reproduces a polite expression in real social occasions, but compared with “bared teeth”, the realistic expression corresponding to “smile” Emoji is relatively more reserved, lacking a kind of heartfelt joy, but only a gesture that must be held in social occasions. If using the dramaturgical theory to understand, “smile” Emoji gives people a more similar impression to a deliberate “performance”, rather than a natural “unintentional expression”. The latter is more convincing than the former. In daily life, the purpose of impression management is not to be completely real, but to “make people feel real”. This sense of reality requires some relaxing gestures in the performance from time to time, although this so-called “performance errors” are also a part of “performance”. Even though social activities on social platforms such as WeChat are not face-to-face, they also follow the self-presentation law of daily social life. The youth team has questioned the solidified “performance” mode in the older team, they are gradually dissatisfied with the traces of some mature “performance” routines, such as this kind of “smile” that does not come from the heart. For the new generation of young people, this kind of social expression is like a mask, which not only hides the real feelings of the individuals, but also makes them false. In the process of gradually understanding the hypocritical and hierarchical social hidden rules in the adult world, young people growing up in the new era are gradually dissatisfied and disgusted with this social model that lacks sincerity and equality. They are more and more eager to build an alternative and minority circle culture and a new sense of identity, and are unwilling to easily conform to the so-called social mainstream. In addition, the open, equal, democratic and shared culture in the Web3.0 era has created a good social ecology for the youth group to build their own circle identity and discourse power. It is no longer difficult for the youth group to build new social and cultural relations on the basis of deconstructing the old social culture. The alienated use of “smile” Emoji has been gradually understood and accepted by other social groups with the promotion of youth groups. Some members of older groups even learned this usage in their social interaction with young people and used it in their daily virtual social interaction. At the same time, the WeChat platform also adopted this new coding method and applied it to encode the new Emojis, the emergence of “split” Emoji (the image of “smile” Emoji split, indicating “frustrated” and other negative emotions) is an example. These phenomena reflect the acceptance and tolerance of mainstream culture to youth subculture, as well as the great social influence of such youth subculture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the era of in-depth development of Internet society, many social media have emerged, which has brought great changes to people's social life, and a series of corresponding new cultures have emerged. With the rapid development of digital economy, China, as a populous country, has a relatively large user base of its Internet social platform. As the most important and important social media in China, WeChat covers users of all ages and has become an indispensable media and platform for people's daily social communication. Many new changes in social culture have taken place on this platform. Emoji is the most basic kind of nonverbal symbols on WeChat. It widely exists in the process of instant messaging and provides emotional assistance to text content. With the expansion of the use of Emoji on WeChat, many new social culture phenomena related to it have emerged, among which the most special one is the alienated use of "smile" Emoji. This essay pays attention to this new phenomenon of virtual social networking in China. Based on the reference and analysis of relevant research results, this essay analyzes and explains it with the help of Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Through comparative analysis, case analysis and other research methods, this essay deeply enters the WeChat context. Combined with the current situation of scientific, technological and cultural development in the world, this essay discusses the reasons and impacts of the alienated use of "smile" Emoji on the WeChat platform, and also involves the analysis of the intergenerational differences in the use of Emoji in China's virtual social context. These discussions on the transformation and identification of Emoji meaning on the virtual social platform help to understand people's social expression model and social culture pattern in the new environment. At the same time, this essay also notes the deep cultural law behind the intergenerational differences of social interaction. Although the innovation and progress of science and technology have promoted the transformation of people's social style, and the emergence and promotion of Emoji has also promoted the emergence of a new social culture of contemporary young people, traditional social laws and theories, such as "Working Consensus" and "Impression Management" proposed by Goffman, are still restricting people's social activities for a long time and stably. Such laws will not be really deconstructed by the rebellious actions of some young communities, but silently discipline some seemingly rebellious social behaviors and social cultures, and integrate them into the existing traditional system at a deeper level.

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