

Constructing Identities Through Multimodal Design on Social Platforms: A Case Study of WeChat Moments

Dongyan Chen¹, Tongsihan Wang² and Shizhen Xu³

¹College of Foreign Language, Guizhou University, Guiyang, Guizhou, 550000, China

²College of Foreign Language, Hebei Normal University, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, 050024, China

³School of Foreign Languages, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450001, China

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Abstract: In the context of the rapid development of digital media, the application of multimodal discourse is increasingly extensive and life-oriented, and social platforms are also becoming an important space for people to showcase their self-image, where visual design plays a crucial role in user identity construction. This study aims to combine dynamic multimodal discourse analysis with the perspective of identity construction to observe and analyze WeChat Moments, a dynamic social space, to reveal the dynamic process of users' identity construction. The research found that users often utilize multimodal discourse to construct a multidimensional self. For instance, they evoke emotional resonance through images and text, establish a sense of group belonging, and gain recognition by performatively displaying their ideal self. This enriches applying applied linguistics theory to daily life and offers feasible references to the construction of modern citizens' identities.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In the realm of human existence, as Max Weber's concept implies, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun" (Weber, M., 2002). This suggests that individuals are constantly endowing their actions and the information they handle with meaning in engaging with the world. This phenomenon has become even more pronounced along with the rapid advancement of digital media. People are no longer content with mere recording or recollection; instead, the desire to use photographs for self-expression has grown significantly (Berger, J., 1972). Especially for college students who have grown up with technology, maintaining an authentic and engaging online persona is a continual and time-consuming process (Stokes & Price, 2017). In terms of the development of media, Günther Kress captures precisely the essence by mentioning that digital screens, with their unique interactivity and immediacy, have changed the way people communicate and interact. Traditional print media have been forced to give way to their digital counterparts. The evolution of media forms towards multimodality not only means the superposition of the visual logic when information is organized but also

heralds the innovation and optimization of communication effects when resources are intertwined. The application of multimodal discourse offers people the opportunity to conduct abundant visual design, thereby dynamically satisfying various psychological needs behind self-identity construction, interest-driven motivation, public culture, or other factors. From a multimodal vantage point, the visual designs of different user groups on social platforms exhibit other functions, characteristics, and patterns in identity construction.

1.2 Literature Review

O'Halloran pointed out that in different sociocultural contexts, there are notable disparities in the visual designs of different user groups (O'Halloran, 2006). For the adolescent group, Tong Xin et al. analyzed the construction of their digital identity model through questionnaires. They concluded that there are four influencing factors: "friendship-driven", "new media literacy", "online public culture", and "interest-driven" (Tong, et al., 2020). For the college student group, scholars have respectively conducted multi-dimensional explorations and reflections from different perspectives (Gan et al., 2022; Stokes & Price, 2017; Yan & Han, 2024). There are adverse aspects to the Social Networking Sites (SNS)

presentation of the self-online which can be mitigated through meticulous guidance and judicious approaches (Stokes & Price, 2017).

Ravelli and Van Leeuwen pointed out that in the digital media era, there are three main research directions in multimodal discourse analysis: first, re-examining the multimodality of digital tools (Ravelli & Van Leeuwen, 2018). Second, guiding frameworks for new encoding methods; and third, critically analyzing power and identity issues in multimodal discourse, known as Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Wu & Zhao, 2022). The research by Machin and Mayr laid the foundation for this field by analyzing the choice of symbols in multimodal discourse in advertisements and media publicity to reveal the underlying values and identity constructions (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Additionally, Professor Li also conducted an in-depth exploration of Kress and Leeuwen's contributions to visual grammar and functional grammar, analyzing the three major meanings, representation, interaction, and composition, in multimodal discourse (Li, 2003). This especially provided methodological guidelines for this paper, such as image content analysis and social semiotics analysis.

1.3 Research Topic

Based on the above significance exploration and literature review, this section points out the research gaps and challenges discovered during the study. First, current multimodal perspective analyses have a propensity to concentrate on static discourse and social semiotic models, while research combining dynamic discourse and identity construction remains scant. The identities of users on social platforms are dynamically changing and multi-constructed, making it challenging for existing studies to fully capture and explain this complex process. Second, research in this field tends to zero in on isolated instances of communication, with relatively few longitudinal studies tracking identity construction across multiple positions or over extended periods. Most studies focus on multimodal discourse at specific moments or single events, without sufficiently considering the evolution of user identities across different social contexts and periods. Furthermore, data analysis of dynamic multimodal discourse becomes complicated due to factors such as contextual diversity and individual user differences, making corpus processing more challenging. In qualitative analysis, researchers need to accurately interpret the implicit meanings of users from different cultural backgrounds and social strata in dynamic multimodal

discourse, requiring multidisciplinary knowledge such as intercultural communication and sociology. In quantitative research, the unstructured and complex nature of dynamic multimodal data makes it difficult to establish effective quantitative indicators to measure the relationships between modes and their impact on identity construction.

In this regard, this study focuses on the identity construction of visual design in social platforms under the multi-modal perspective, taking WeChat Moment as an example to conduct in-depth exploration. In China, WeChat Moment provides rich materials for the study of user identity construction, owing to its easy operation, strong popularity, and high authenticity and naturalness. In-depth research on the identity construction of users in a more private social platform not only helps to reveal how individuals show themselves, interact with others, and build social relations through video design in the digital age but also provides an empirical basis for understanding the mechanism of multi-modal action in a social context. Through the analysis of user behavior patterns, content presentation, interaction mode, and other aspects in the circle of friends, this paper will gain insight into how users use multi-modal resources to build multidimensional identity images, as well as the social and psychological motivations behind such identity construction. The final research results can provide valuable references for the design and optimization of social platforms, users' self-presentation strategies, and theoretical development in related fields, and promote the further application and expansion of multimodal discourse analysis.

1.4 Research Objectives

This paper aims to apprehend the manifested behavior patterns of WeChat users in the Moments and analyze their personalized identity construction. By integrating the findings of others regarding related psychological needs, we endeavor to probe into users' social interaction mechanism and internal motivation in the social network from a micro perspective. From a macro level, this research also commits to capturing the extrinsic manifestations of users' behavior patterns and identity construction in a naturalistic context. Through the whole process, we hope that certain empirical data and corpus support can be provided. Ultimately, the relationship between digital identity and real identity will be combined and summarized to obtain more universal laws and explore practical significance.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Sample Selection

In the highly information-oriented era where meanings abound, how do people weave their identity nets? Based on the view that communication is the transmission and understanding of meaning, this article regards the use of media as a bridge for communication (Robbins, S. P., & Coulter, 2017). The reason for choosing WeChat Moments as this bridge is based on the comprehensive consideration of the following factors.

Firstly, the simplicity of the operation of WeChat Moments makes it stronger applicability across areas of interest and age groups in China. WeChat and its Moments have become essential communication tools for people of all ages in China, so the selection of this research object has a broader coverage and relatively stronger representativeness. Next, the relative authenticity and naturalness of Moments. Different from international social platforms like Facebook and Sina microblog, such a small circle of participants (the presenter and the viewer) is limited to people who have added each other as “friends” or contacts, making users' behaviors and expressions closer to real-life scenarios. The data generated in this natural state can more accurately reflect users' states, giving the research results higher credibility and practical application value. This also points to the third point, the high update frequency of Moments. Due to its relative privacy, those pieces of Moments content tend to be more spontaneous, natural, and close to life. The reveal of people's everyday lives also can be seen at different time points, which facilitates longitudinal research and allows for tracking of the dynamic change process of users' identity construction. Moreover, from the perspective of research itself, Chinese researchers can relatively easily obtain a large amount of original data without the need for additional equipment support.

2.2 Research Methodology

This study opts to thoroughly examine the objective data by applying literature research methods, observational methods, and case study methods to test the applicability of the theories.

Focusing on visual design in WeChat Moments, relevant literature and documents were sought through channels such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and the Wanfang Database. These materials then were analyzed selecting theories related to the topic to explain the viewpoints, thereby

providing a sufficient theoretical foundation for this study. After determining the topic, the author conducted observations on the collected WeChat Moments and classified the data over the past three months. The posts were divided into seven types: pure text, pure image, video, pure link, text plus image, text plus video, and text plus link. These were then tabulated to provide reliable data sources for the research.

Simultaneously, the author imported their WeChat address book into an Excel spreadsheet via the “WeChat Extraction Tool” program and utilized the “Index” and “Randbetween” functions inherent in Excel to identify the college student users within the address book. Subsequently, five college students were randomly selected as specific cases, and their Moments content over three months was observed and analyzed to explore the specific ways in which they construct certain identities.

Additionally, the researchers consulted relevant interview cases from the database, with the interview content concentrating on the manners in which users present themselves and the motivations for concealing in Moments. Thereby, all the above facilitated a better understanding of the psychological processes of users when using Moments.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Content Analysis

Analyzing the Moments of five college students, we found that the components are mainly divided into the following 5 types: content, form, interaction mode, language style, and update frequency (Table 1). In the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that speech and behavior in everyday life are a kind of performance, a specific performance in one particular situation (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, taking the Moments of five college students randomly into consideration, it can be found that users will act toward their ideal selves when making social interactions on this platform. The concrete ways of identity construction are depicted in Table 1, which demonstrates how users selectively share diverse content. Getting beyond such surfaces as travel experiences, trending news, campus life, and hobbies, it can be revealed that users shape various identities such as travelers who enjoy life, thinkers who care about society, and students who actively participate in activities. By publicly presenting

Table 1: Composition of the Moments of five college students in three months.

Users	Elements of the Moments				
User A	Content	Format	Interaction	Language style	Update frequency
	Mainly campus life and tourism	Landscape or selfie plus text, text plus emoji, video plus text	Mainly by replying to comments	lively, humorous	Two to three updates per week
User B	Mainly on love topics and hobbies	Selfie plus text with emojis	Directly @ someone	lively and relaxed	One or two updates per week
User C	Mainly to share campus activities.	Send a hyperlink or event poster with the appropriate text and emoji.	Encourage others to leave comments in the comment section.	Passionate	Irregular updates
User D	Mainly sharing travel experiences and books.	Scenery plus text, pure text	Mainly by replying to comments	Literary and Artistic	One or two updates per week
User E	Mainly to share subject knowledge and news	Send hyperlinks, a few with text, rarely use emojis	Take the initiative to express your views in the comment section	Rigorous	Irregular updates

Table 2: Self-presentation content of WeChat users.

Type	Text-only	Image-only	Small video type	Pure link	Text -image type	Text-video	Text -link	total
Quantity	223	120	21	136	808	84	116	1508
Proportion	14.79%	7.96%	1.39%	9.02%	53.58%	5.57%	7.69%	100%

Table 3: WeChat users' discursive practices to construct interactional identity.

Discursive Practice	Characteristics
Self	Autonomous, personalized, diversified, contextualization
Text	Immediate, expressive, emotional
Rhetoric	Antithesis or parallelism, comparison, exaggeration
Cite the practice	Interactive feedback, emotional resonance, and seeking responses
Comment Behavior	Praise, have fun, critical evaluation.
Exchange of information	Timeliness, interactivity, dynamics

photographs, videos, or hyperlinks (User C and User E), with humorous, enthusiastic, or encouraging words, users display their personalities and ideal qualities intentionally or unconsciously. Furthermore, the degree of social activeness and interpersonal network-building skills also are exhibited via several interactive ways, like comment sections. The control of the frequency of posting also reflects their strategy of striking a balance between their ideal self and their real self which is constructed in cyberspace, to create a credible self-image on social media to gain respect and recognition in social networks.

According to Table 2, the survey users are more inclined to use the conjunction of text-image (53.58%), text-only (14.79%), and pure link (9.02%) to construct their self-identity. This shows that multimodal discourse can help users maintain their self-image from multiple dimensions such as story description, opinion statement, and emotional appeal. It can be seen that under the interaction of multiple

visual resources, users can construct a three-dimensional and multi-faceted identity for themselves, and its dynamic nature can also promote interaction between individuals.

According to Tables 2 and 3, this study analyzed content and form to ascertain that the synchronic logic of images can assist users in eliciting the audience's emotional resonance and interactive participation. At the empirical level, images that tell a story are called Narrative Representation because they represent the world in the form of actions and events (Kress. & Leeuwen, 2020). The characteristics of its different discourse practices can be seen in Table 3, and on digital platforms such as Moments, narrative presentation exhibits greater autonomy, dynamism, and interactivity due to its multimodal form. The red-dotted head portrait in the interface, when any added friend posts a new piece of Moment, and the number of messages in the comment section, are both updates in real-time, giving users an

omniscient perspective on the real-time status of their friends. At the level of interpersonal meaning, users can promptly respond to others' information through instant transmission of information, and interact with the changes of identity in different scenarios to construct a clearer identity and group category.

3.2 Case Analysis

Based on the combing and analysis of the above relevant literature and data results, the following will carry out specific analysis ideas from an empirical perspective, and we choose the WeChat Moment of a Chinese female graduate as an example. This is the text content:

"I felt like I have lived an ideal life, and after a busy week, I ate hot pot with my pretty sis [tearful emoji]! There are cute pets, and every day after coming to Beijing is very felicitous [tearful emoji]. From time to time, I am shocked and often secretly rejoiced that such a beautiful, gentle, and intelligent girl is willing to like me so much [tearful emoji]!"

The accompanied picture content (a total of 9 photos) comprises 3 female photos, 4 photos of hot pot and gifts, and 2 screenshots of chat history. The analysis is as follows: Firstly, interpersonal meaning can be achieved by constructing a sense of participation, power relations, and a particular modal tone. While the user's text expresses her appreciation and esteem for a female friend, two of the pictures then show their chatting history and their group photo. This combination especially gives this female friend a strong sense of participation and interactive experience, and the two modalities also confirm each other's authenticity. In addition, the user exhibited the first-person food photos through the live feed, which presented the theme of "eating hot pot together" (also "ideal life" and "very felicitous") to the audience. From another perspective, according to the experiential function of language, which refers to the expression of language to people's various experiences in the real world (including the inner world), it can be found in the empirical sense that the user not only uses images of various scenes (diet and working performance) to conduct the narration but also uses words to express her reflection of life: "busyness and concentration are hallucinogens with curative effects" (from the user's next WeChat Moment content) (Hu et al., 2005).

Judging from the data, users tend to use multimodal forms such as the combination of images and texts to construct identities, and different presentation methods correspond to different pragmatic identity expressions, so it is no wonder that

Mirtsov lamented that images are not just a part of life, but life itself (Tan, 2015). From the case study, the behavior of users in the WeChat Moments can be found consistent with Goffman's self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959). To a certain extent, it is performed in the orientation of the ideal self to obtain the recognition of others and self.

4 CONCLUSIONS

From a multimodal perspective, this study concludes that the identity construction of users in WeChat Moments is multidimensional and dynamic. It analyzed how users use visual design to construct a multidimensional self and ideal self, clarifying the underlying behavioral motivations and influences. However, compared to the initial research objectives, this study has not entirely reached the ideal state. The following outlines several limitations for future researchers to continue improving upon.

Initially, one limitation lies in the sample selection. This study only selected five university students as specific case study subjects, of which the small quantity made it limited to young people. Thus, it cannot fully represent users of different ages and social backgrounds, nor reflect the overall identity construction of social platform users.

Additionally, in terms of research depth, although this study mentions that sociocultural and interpersonal contextual factors influence identity construction, how these complex factors (like cultural and psychological factors) specifically affect the identity-construction process remains superficial and insufficient. If a broader theoretical study could be expanded, the conclusions of this study would be clearer and more accurate.

Furthermore, the implementation of research methods is also partially restricted by technical levels and periods. The effect of observational methods may be influenced by the inevitable subjective comprehension of the researchers, as different researchers might have different interpretations and judgment standards of WeChat Moments content, which will affect data objectivity and accuracy. A three-month observation period may not comprehensively encompass the long-term changes and stability of user identity construction.

Given all these above, this study sees a rich potential for combining multimodal fields with identity theory. Therefore, we encourage and expect the academic community to conduct broader and deeper discussions on this topic. Related scholars may consider expanding the sample range, including

users of different ages, professions, regions, and cultural backgrounds, to jointly build a widely representative sample library. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary research method is recommended to be employed. Integrating sociological, cultural anthropological, and psychological research outcomes, helps to deeply analyze the mechanisms of identity construction. Certainly, more precise analysis of related corpora requires more advanced data analysis technologies, to better handle the complexity of multimodal data and deeply reveal the intrinsic relationship between digital identity construction and multimodal visual design. In summary, we hope this study can inspire the academic community to generate novel insights and embark on new explorations on the limitless potential of digital media and functional linguistics in everyday life.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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