



Research on Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization in Socialization of WeChat Communities

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Abstract. This study primarily analyzes how users construct emotional identities through specific emojis in WeChat group interactions. Grounded in the theoretical framework of discursive identity construction, this research elaborates on the dynamic, performative, and interactive characteristics of emojis in WeChat communities, as well as their role in shaping group cognition. According to the findings, emojis not only complement the text-based communication and rectify its limitations but also serve as a vital tool for users to express emotions, construct identities, negotiate power dynamics, and foster group belonging. The research findings reveal a novel perspective on emojis in identity performance and emotional symbolization, offering reference for users to appropriately construct identities and effectively manage emotions in social platforms.

Keywords: WeChat communities, identity performance, emotional symbolization, discursive identity construction

1 Introduction

Depending on its powerful community feature, WeChat stands out among various social platforms in China constructing a communicative space where users exchange their ideas by words, pictures, emojis and so on, which creates WeChat's specialty of identity performance and emotional symbolization. Over the past decades, an in-depth framework of researches on identity construction and emotion expressions have been successfully established with identity construction theories. Ma Xuesong concentrates on the connection between identity construction and media discourse from the perspective of post-structuralism discourse theory while a lack of specific focal point leads to limitations in analysis for role-play and emotional symbolization^[1]. Song Dexiao and other scholars conduct a research on the self-deprecating phenomenon of contemporary youths, highlighting the way of identity construction in social media, self-mockery^[2]. Wang Fengxian focuses on the diffusion of social anxiety in cyberspace, pointing out the interrelationship between meme reproduction and emotional proliferation^[3]. Li Xin and other scholars make critical construction of demotivational cultures' discourse, illustrating efficiency of symbolization^[4]. All these researches communally provide theoretical support and practical inspiration for identity performance and emotional

symbolization in WeChat communities. Adopting observational method, this research explores the deep meaning of inner mechanisms in identity performance and emotional symbolization in various communities with collection of their interactive information. This research's innovation point lies in thoroughly studying emojis, identity performance and emotional symbolization's core media, from a new theoretical perspective, and forming a new aspect targeted at social platforms' environments for users' identity construction and emotion control.

2 Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization Phenomenon in WeChat Communities

2.1 Dynamics and Performativity of Identity

According to identity construction theory's core point that identity is the process of dynamic construction in social interactions, this study conducts a multi-layered exploration of WeChat communities. Users' identities in WeChat communities are not fixed. By sending specific emojis, users can exhibit their emotional state, personal standpoints and attitudes, or positions. In socializations with others, individuals gradually shape and form their own identity. It is the repetitive use of emojis and flexible changes of situations that embody the dynamics of identity.

For instance, for those who frequently use the comforting or encouraging emoji (❤️), they tend to be categorized into emotional supporters that convey positive energy and enhance solidarity of members in communities. Meanwhile, the image of a helpless critic can be portrayed with the sarcastic emoji (🙄). Consequently, users' stress and anxiety may be soothed in this easy and humorous way. This kind of role playing is close to what's described in Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. Every time users send emojis, it's an epitome of repeated practice of identity transformation which subtly challenges identity boundaries^[5].

2.2 Interactive Construction of Identity Discourse

From the perspective of social constructivism, the symbolized application of WeChat emojis have a threefold mechanism, including power consultation, group recognition and context complement. Firstly, new members successfully integrate into communities with the assistance of frequently used emojis while administrators guarantee and enhance their right of speech by emojis such as “🔴” when giving orders or launching rules, thereby entering the phase of power consultation. Secondly, sub-cultural communities form symbolic boundaries through exclusive emojis, with which one can be categorized into members of this community to achieve a sense of belonging and recognition. Thirdly, emojis are able to complement words, conveying tones, gestures and so on that words cannot exhibit. For example, the emoji “😂” can weaken the acuteness of sarcasm, making dialogues harmonious and humorous.

2.3 Symbolic Layers of Expressing Emotions

The key characteristic of emotional symbolization in WeChat communities is symbolic layers of expressing emotions. Based on Butler's identity deconstruction strategy, Austin's speech act theory and Bakhtin's symbolic polyphony theory, symbols of expressing emotions can be sorted into layer of ironic deconstruction, layer of basic emotions and layer of metaphorical symbols^[6].

A collective identity of self-mocking users is constructed by weakening serious discourse in the layer of ironic deconstruction. A series of emojis like "fear+555" employ exaggerated dreadful facial expressions combined with numerical homophony, not only imparting young people's anxious moods but also shaping their collective identities of confronting pressure by self-mockery. Besides, emojis represented by  and  indicate subtle romance, revealing a complex but exquisite mental world. In basic emotion layer, indignance can be explicitly illustrated by  and .

3 Case Analysis: Specific Practices of Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization in WeChat Communities

This study chooses workplace, sub-culture and multinational communities as samples. These groups are selected to represent different kinds of users and their interaction modes, comprehensively showcasing the effects of identity performance and emotional symbolization in practice on multiple social occasions.

3.1 Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization in Workplace

In occupational communities, users show their professional identities and dedication by means of emojis such as  and . They tend to be regarded as diligent strivers, an identity which is conducive to enhance professional recognition of customers and promote emotional communication and teamwork among colleagues. Simultaneously, emotional symbolization in workplace also reflects users' unique ways of coping with stress. Applying emojis such as  can express helplessness and tiredness towards heavy workloads, arousing sympathy and support among co-workers.

3.2 Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization in Sub-culture Communities

Sub-culture groups such as 2-D(ACG) communities depend on exclusive emojis to form symbolic boundaries and recognize fellows. These emojis have unique visual elements and cultural connotations, exhibiting users' hobbies and identity characteristics. Symbols such as kaomoji not only appear cute and adorable but present users' preference and belonging to 2-D culture. Meanwhile, emotional symbolization in sub-culture communities also embody user's ways of expressing specific emotions.  can

impart their touched feelings and resonance towards moving stories, consolidating emotional bonds and solidarity among community members.

3.3 Identity Performance and Emotional Symbolization's Challenge in Multinational Communities

Confronted with challenges of cross-cultural cognitive bias, there may exist differences in interpretations of the same emoji among different language users due to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, 🍌 means approval or agreement for English speakers while it's regarded as a symbol of insult for French speakers. In multinational socialization, code switching strategy is of necessity to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts. On the other hand, through learning and flexible application emojis in different cultural backgrounds, users' can expand their social network and broaden cultural horizons to promote cultural exchanges and integration.

4 Emotional Symbols' Moulding Effects on Collective Cognition in WeChat Communities

4.1 Reconstruction of Cognitive Framework

Relying on visual priority principle, emojis change information processing modes to shape community cognition. According to findings, the adoption rate of proposals with 🍌 have increased by 23%, illustrating symbols' intervening effects to rational judgement. The reconstruction of cognitive framework not only affects users' decision-making processes but strengthens cohesion of communities after consensus construction^[7].

4.2 Symbolic Encoding of Power Relations

Emojis also become symbolic encoding tools related to power relations.

Most of overt authorities in communities take control of power for making and explaining rules. Alerting emojis are similar to serious alarming signs and conspicuous prohibitory signals, enhancing their right of speech to achieve steady and standardized community order.

Covert dominants adopt a more acceptable strategy. Instead of showing absolute power directly, they use a large number of friendly emojis, such as 😊 and 🍌 to create a warm and harmonious atmosphere, which is actually an accumulation of emotional capitals to improve their influence and win support in communities.

Resistant expressers are active members in communities, who hold dissatisfaction and skillfully deploy creative but sarcastic emojis imitating animals to conduct meanings' guerrilla warfare.

4.3 Cross-cultural Cognitive Bias and Code-switching Strategy

In this colorful communicative space, a major challenge emotional symbolization faces is differences in cultural understanding, users' cross-cultural and cross-language backgrounds, and interpretation and application of emojis. To solve these problems, users are supposed to be familiar with code-switching skills, which means immediate consideration of cultural backgrounds and communicative habits. Besides, they ought to comprehensively take others' cultural differences and tolerance into account with a careful choice of words and deliberate avoidance of offensive symbols.

With code-switching strategy, users can efficiently decrease misunderstanding and clashes and increase interpretation and respect for foreign cultures. Thus, users of different cultural backgrounds can achieve extensive exchanges and integration, enabling WeChat to become a more colorful and tolerant platform which advocates inclusiveness and receptiveness of multiple culture expressions. The charm of WeChat is evident especially as a global communicative platform.

5 Conclusion

Above all, identity performance and emotional symbolization is of great research value. With continuous innovation and development of social media technology, study trend of this realm will go more complex. Cross-cultural symbols will become the focus of further researches, and impact of identity performance and emotional symbolization to community dynamics and behavioral modes will win more popularity. As for research methods, the combination of theory and practices is needed with big data and AI technology to bring insight to the inner logic and rules of symbols.

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