



Article

## **The Identity Construction of Microblog Users from the Perspective of Impression Management Theory**

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the emergence of mobile social media and platforms has made the communication between people more and more convenient. As a social media platform based on user relations, microblog users can realize the real-time sharing and interaction of information in the form of multimedia such as text, pictures and videos. Therefore, it is of certain theoretical and practical significance to study how microblog users use this new social stage for impression management and identity construction. Based on impression management theory, this study adopts the method of combining qualitative and quantitative to analyze and study the motivation and strategy of ordinary microblog users (different from celebrities) when using microblog and their construction identities. The research shows that when ordinary microblog users use Weibo for impression management, most users prefer to use acquired impression management strategies, publishing positive, healthy and upward content, and through these they construct positive personal identities. In addition, the main motivation of these users for using microblog is to win likes and attention from others, which is beneficial for users to manage their image and better promote the healthy development of social network.

**Keywords:** impression management; identity construction; microblog user

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### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the emergence of mobile social media and platforms has made the communication between people more and more convenient. Research data has shown that by the end of 2021, the monthly active users of Weibo have reached 573 million, providing users with a network field based on real social relations and opening up a new stage for people's impression management behavior. In addition, the boom of social networks has changed

people's impression management behavior from "offline" to "online". There are lots of research has shown that online impression management is similar to offline impression management. Li Weihua (2009) found that people's roles in QQ space are related to real life roles (such as family relationships and workplace relationship) is similar, the corresponding role characteristics are in line with the requirements of social norms, and most of them are positive. That is to say that good impression management can strengthen the impression of managers in the minds of others to meet the need to build relationships. Therefore, Weibo users can better show, shape and maintain their image by updating and publishing their daily life, so as to improve their image in the eyes of others, so as to win more likes and attention. So it is obvious that impression management has an important influence on interpersonal communication and social life.

With the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) as the theoretical framework, this study makes a statistical analysis of the impression management strategies used in the daily life sharing of ordinary users of Weibo, and deeply analyzes the personal identities they constructed. This is beneficial for better understanding the identity construction from the perspective of impression management theory, and also is conducive to the better development of social networks environment.

## **2. 2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Studies on Impression Management Theory**

Impression management is sometimes called impression decoration, but also called self-presentation. It refers to the process by which the interacting party influences and controls the other party in a certain way. Goffman (1959) puts forward the concept of "impression management" in his representative book *Self-Presentation in Daily Life*. Many scholars have studied the classification of impression management from different perspectives and reach different conclusions. For example, Akin (1981) divides the individual into acquisitive self-presentation and protective self-presentation from the specific behaviors of individual impression management. Tetlock (1985) divides individuals' impression management into defensive impression management and assertive impression management. In addition, Roth (1986) divides individuals into attributive self-presentation and denies self-expression according to the individual attribution of the self-image. Different scholars have developed corresponding studies on the motivation of impression management. Goffman (1959) argues that people have various motives to manage their self-image. The image of the participants is praised by the society as "have face", and the failure is called "have no face". Jones (1964) conducts an in-depth analysis of the "ingratiation" in impression management, and except that he also points out that the growth of rights is one of the motivations of impression management. Baumeister (1982) thinks that pleasing the audience and constructing the self-image of the public are the main motivation of impression management. Leary and Kowalski (1990) proposes the two-component model, they argues that impression management includes two discontinuous components or processes. In other words, it mainly contains impression motivation and impression construction. Xin and other scholars (2016) conduct

an analysis of the motivation and strategies of WeChat impression management of college students. Haber and Tesoriero (2018) conduct a classified study on students' impression management motivation in class. Besides, numerous researchers have also studied the strategies of impression management. Many scholars have proposed self-promotion strategies, where individuals show their abilities and achievements to the target audience to make them feel more competitive (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Eills & West, 2002). Becker and Martin (1995) believe that pleading is also a strategy for impression management, namely, using one's own weaknesses to influence others. Schlenker (1980) states that boasting belongs to an acquired impression management strategy. Scott and Lyman (1968) states that rationalizations are used to explain adverse behavior and make up for the differences between behavior and expectations. Hewitt and Stokes (1975) suggest that disclaimer is a possible protective impression management strategy. Rosenfeld (1995) points out that the self-barrier and apology are also protective impression management strategies. On the basis of previous research, An and Rong (2014) divide impression management strategies into acquired, protective and indirect impression management strategies. Chen (2020) also analyzes the impression management strategy of Bilibili Overseas Chinese students. In recent years, the empirical research on impression management has achieved fruitful results. The research content of impression management mainly focuses on the construction of strategies. For example, Lu (2006) has studied the impression management strategy of job interview for college graduates. Liu (2007) analyzes the construction of impression management strategy for marketing personnel. Bao (2008) explains impression management strategy of clinical medical school teachers. Song (2011) studies the impression management strategy in the hotel service and Yi (2013) studies the self-disclosure and self-expectation image of college students' microblog. Wang (2016) analyzes the face presentation strategies based on the impression management theory. In addition to above mentioned, many scholars have also discussed the motivation and strategy of impression management in college students' WeChat circle of friends (Xin Wenjuan, 2016; Zhao Libo, 2017; Shen Yiqing, 2019). Wu (2019) studies the self-impression management of the movement punching phenomenon in WeChat circle of friends. Sun (2020) analyzes the management strategy of college counselors based on the impression management theory. Hu (2021) studies the construction strategy of the WeChat public account of academic journal. Li (2022) analyzes the discourse mode of employment based on the face theory of impression management. Wu and Feng (2022) conduct a study on the digital public diplomacy discourse under the COVID-19 pandemic based on impression management theory.

## 2.2. Studies on Identity Construction

Identity plays a very important role in people's life, which experiences multi-stage development and multi-disciplinary transformation. The philosophical origin of identity construction manifested in Kant's philosophy, Hegel's constructivist historical view, and Piaget's genetic epistemology as well as the cognitive structure theory of Bruner (1997), all of which greatly promote the development of constructivism. According to the school of

constructivism, they believe that everything in the world is constructed, and the process of construction is mainly realized through human language communication. The sociological and psychological origin of identity construction is reflected in numerous scholars. Goffman (1959) defines identity as the self-existence of a specific group, which has its community impact. Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguish three different forms of identity representations, which include individual representation, interpersonal representation and group representation. And then they illustrate that these three forms correspond to different kinds of individual identities, interpersonal identity and group identity. Besides, many sociologists have explained the relationship between identity and social environment. That is to say that one's language choice can reflect their identity (Labov, 1966; Stryker, 1980; Zimmerman, 1998; Gu Xiaojuan & Li Yi, 2007). Richards (2006) adopts the classification of Zimmerman (1998), which was created by him on the broader field of member classification analysis. The results show that different kinds of identity orientation produce completely different interaction patterns in teacher-led dialogues. At the end of the 20th century, the identity construction aroused the attention of different areas linguists. They think identity can reflect discourse and vice versa. What's more, they also point out that identity is the product of discourse, which is dynamic and changing according to different communicative contexts. In addition, these researchers explain that identity can be constructed through discursive practices (Fan Hongya & Song Rui, 2021). Tracy and Robles (2013) explain the relationship between identity and discursive practices from two perspectives. One is the cultural perspective, the other is the rhetorical perspective. The cultural perspective regards identity as the social attributes that people have before they enter a communicative occasion, such as age, gender and nationality, etc. From the perspective of rhetoric, they define identity as a product between interlocutors in a specific context, and this identity constructed by participants is often purposeful so that they achieve certain communicative intentions. Furthermore, they also give a detailed division of identity, which contains master identity, interactive identity, and personal identity. Master identity is one's identity which is relatively stable and difficult to change (e. g., age, gender, race, etc.). Interactive identity refers to the identity in which people interact with others in a specific context. Personal identity includes one's personal characteristics (such as serious, friendly, rude, etc.), or their relationship with others or their attitude and stance towards other people or things. Chen (2013) first proposes pragmatic identity, who believes that the construction of pragmatic identity depends on a certain communicative context. And then he forms a new theoretical analysis framework based on Tracy and Robles' discursive practices framework. Duan (2017) summarizes the different pragmatic strategies of identity construction in institutional discourse and explores the pragmatic motivation of constructing different identities as well as points out that these participants how to achieve the communicative purpose through identity construction. The study reveals the interlocutors' identity constructed by the instructive verbal conversation structure, speech act, impolite principles, humor and other strategies. Zou (2022) studies the identity construction of female in Xi Fu Hui from the perspective of speech act theory proposed by Searle, which provides a new research endorsement for future research.

### 2.3. Summary

According to above description, there are some research space available: (1) the research field of impression management mainly focuses on the recruitment and interview process, and the research groups are mainly teachers, college students who send Wechat moments, marketing staff and so on. There is relatively little research on microblog users. (2) Previous studies on impression management focused on the strategies construction of individuals and groups, while empirical research on identity construction mainly focused on the identity construction of teachers, doctors and moderators. There are few studies on the identity of the impression strategy construction used by microblog users. Therefore, this study takes the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) as the theoretical framework, and analyzes not only the impression management strategy and motivation used by microblog users, but also analyzes the personal identities they constructed.

### 3. Theoretical framework

Leary and Kowalski (1990) propose the two-component model, they argue that impression management includes two discontinuous components or processes. In other words, it mainly contains impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation refers to the desire or motivation of individuals trying to control others over their impressions. And the impression construction means the individual decides what impression they make on others and how they make them. In addition, they also explain the impression construction strategy in detail, which is divided into acquired and protective impression management strategy. The acquired impression management strategy refers to measures that take to get others to see them positively, which includes ingratiation, self-promotion, pleading and so on. While protective impression management strategy means the measures that take to avoid making others look at them negatively, which contains accounting, apology and disclaimer etc. Based on the two-component mode of impression management, this study not only supplements and improves the existing impression management strategies to some extent, but also analyzes the motivation and construction personal identities of the impression management of ordinary microblog users. As shown in the table1:

Table 1. The Specific Contents of Impression Management Strategies

Impression Management	Strategies
acquired impression management	ingratiation self-promotion pleading
protective impression management	accounting apology disclaimer self-barrier rationalization

#### 4. Research Questions and Methodology

This study takes the daily life shared by 200 ordinary microblog users (different from celebrities) in 2021-2022 as resource corpus. Firstly, keywords such as personal life and daily life are entered into the microblog search bar, and then all the information shared by microblog users in 2021-2022 is integrated. And then, remove the celebrity user’s share, and keep the share of ordinary users. What’s more, according to the literature review, the impression management strategies are divided into acquired impression management strategies and protective impression management strategies. According to their definitions, the daily sharing strategies of ordinary Weibo users in 2021-2022 are classified according to the strategies. The results show that there are totally 200 valid corpora in this study. And finally, 200 valid corpora are code in the data analysis software-Nvivo, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to conduct a statistical analysis of the impression management strategies used in the daily life sharing of ordinary microblog users, and to deeply analyze their motivation and constructed personal identities.

Therefore, this study aims to solve the following questions: (1) What are the impression management strategies used by ordinary users of microblog? (2) What is the impression management motivation of ordinary microblog users? And what personal identities are they constructed?

#### 5. Research Findings and Identity Analysis

##### 5.1 Research Findings

The 200 collected corpus are coded under Nvivo software, after a statistical analysis of the impression management strategies used by 200 ordinary microblog users to share their daily life. The results are shown in the figure1:

Name	Sources	References
Impression Management Strategies	1	200
Acquired Impression Management	1	156
ingratiation	1	82
self-degradation	1	20
self-promotion	1	54
Protective Impression Management	1	44
disclaimer	1	16
rationalization reasons	1	28

**Figure 1. Statistics of Impression Management Strategies**

The figure 1 shows that ordinary Weibo users except use the strategies listed in table 1 proposed by Leary and Kowalski (1990), they also use self-degradation to manage their

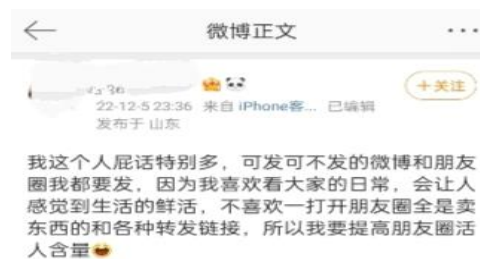
impressions. According to the data from figure1, it shows that microblog users prefer to use acquired impression management strategy in impression management, totally accounting for 78%. Namely, ingratiation strategy accounts for 52.6%, self-promotion strategy accounts for 34.6% and self-degradation strategy accounts for 12.8%. While protective impression management strategies accounts for 22%, the rationalization reasons strategy accounts for 63.6% and disclaimer strategy accounts for 36.4%.

## 5.2 Impression Management Motivation and Identity

After analyzing the daily activities shared by 200 ordinary Weibo users, it is found that their motivation for impression management are varied. But the main motivation is to win likes and attention. In the following parts, the constructed personal identities will be analyzed.

### (1) Humorous User

Example 1:



*I am a lot of bullshit, I want to send the Weibo and circle of friends which can send and not. Because I like to see people's daily life, it will make people feel fresh in life. I don't like to open the circle of friends with all selling things and various forwarding links, so I want to improve the content of living people in the circle of friends.*

In example1, this user uses an acquired impression management strategy. Through he likes to watch people's daily life, it will make people feel fresh in life, it shows that this user use specifically ingratiation strategy to manage himself in Weibo (Jones, 1964). This user expresses that other people's daily life can enrich the life, which raise others attention. In addition, he also uses some humorous words and expressions "bullshit" and "improve the living content of the circle of friends" and other words to increase the goodwill. By this way, this user constructs himself as a humorist. Through ingratiation strategy, he is not only manage his image, but also gains the likes of others.

### (2) Self-mocking User

Example 2:



*I can't say whether I am happy or unhappy recently, but I feel like a person when I didn't take a selfie today, which is a little happy.*

*Life: collapse*

*Me: Humming and making up and posting some stupid little selfies on my stupid personal page.*

The above two examples show that both Weibo users use the acquired impression management strategy. They manage themselves through self-degradation strategy, they expresses “it is a little happy to feel like a person today” and “posting some stupid little selfies on my stupid personal page.” not only avoids hypocrisy and falsehood, but also increases others' goodwill for themselves. They use the self-degradation words and expressions such as stupid and feel like a person constructs the identity of a self-mocking users. At the same time, through the self-degradation strategy, they can shorten the distance between others, and gain the attention of others.

### (3) Modest Users

Example 3:



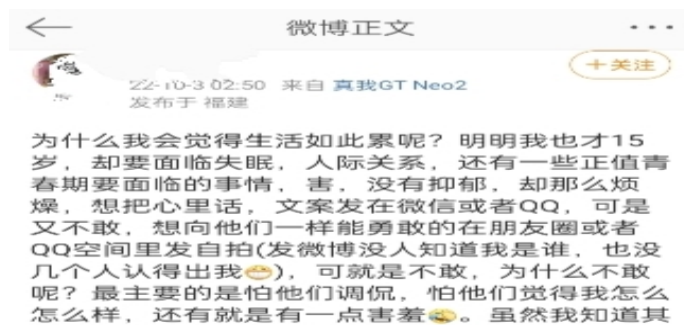
*A few days ago, I and my sister made the spicy cabbage out of the oven. I'm not boast, it really tasted almost the same as buying. But this time I only made one. Without saying more, the new cabbage was arranged on the road.*

In example 3, Weibo users use the acquired impression management strategy, namely the self-promotion strategy. For example: it really tasted almost the same as buying shows their ability to cook (Jones & Pittman, 1982). In order to avoid hypocrisy and falsehood, causing others to dislike, this user shows in a modest tone that “not boasting” has won the favor and interaction of others, and at the same time she has constructed a modest identity. By this way, it can win the likes of others.

### (4) Vulnerable Users

Example 4:





*Why do I find life so tiring? Clearly I also only 15 years old, but to face insomnia, interpersonal relationship, there are some things to face during adolescence. No depression, but so irritable. I want to put the heart, copy writing in WeChat or QQ, but also dare not, want to send some pictures in the circle of friends or QQ space like they can be brave (tweet no one know who I am, also few people recognize me). But is dare not, why dare not? The most important is afraid of them ridicule, afraid they think I how, besides, there is a little shy.*

In example 4, this users used a protective impression management strategy. It fills the gap between the behavior and expectations of wanting to publish his “heart” on social media such as Moments (Scott & Lyman, 1968). To rationalize his reluctance to express his mind by showing that he was shy or afraid of being ridiculed by others, he wins some of his readers’ empathy, which constructs himself as a vulnerable user. In addition, the use of this kind of strategy can gain the supports of others.

## 6. Conclusion

This study mainly analyzes the impression management strategy and motivation used by ordinary Weibo users, and the identity constructed in this process. The study shows that among the 200 subjects selected in this study, 156 mainly uses the acquired impression management strategy, and their main motivation is to express their own views and win the attention of others and gain fans. In addition, 156 microblog users uses the acquired impression management strategy to mainly construct positive personal identities, such as humorous, self-mocking and modest identities, while 44 users uses the strategy of protective impression management to construct the negative personal identities. Through the analysis, it aims to improve microblog users’ awareness of impression management, and it is also conducive to the healthy development of the network environment. Of course, this study has some limitations, the number of corpus is not sufficient, and the age and gender of the research subjects are not considered into this study. Therefore, further future studies can be done on this basis, so as to enrich it.

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