

Study on the Identity Construction of Characters in TikTok Short Videos from the Perspective of Impression Management

Hongya Fan, Jing An

School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Shanxi 030006, China

Abstract: Nowadays, short videos have emerged as a significant aspect of contemporary life, attracting the attention of audiences worldwide. Users of platform like TikTok present colorful facets of their existence, including family life, parenthood, professional experience and so on. Within these videos, characters skillfully design their interactions to create an atmosphere of levity and amusement and try to leave an unforgettable impression on audiences. Therefore, individuals employ various strategies to manage their images, aiming to construct compelling identities. This study endeavors to explore the identities constructed by characters in TikTok short videos through different impression management strategies and delineates their distinct features and significance. The study draws upon data collected from the popular short video platform, TikTok, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results find that characters mainly construct five types of identities, promoters, operators, sharers, leaders, masters of cross-cultural knowledge through various acquisitive and protective impression management strategies. Thus, it's clear that how users of public platform generate positive meanings and diverse values that resonate with netizens. And these characters' impression management fosters the evolution of mass media and influences social benefits.

Keywords: Identity Construction; Impression Management; Short Videos.

1. Introduction

The 52nd *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* reveals that the user base for short videos has surged to 1.012 billion, accounting for 94.8% of the total Internet population. Short videos have become the center of mobile Internet users' attention. As a contemporary medium, short videos are characterized by their accessibility, interactivity and innovative forms. Moreover, they serve as a vital platform for daily communication, significantly affecting the individual identity construction.

On the other hand, the process of identity construction and impression management are intrinsically intertwined. Within the new media context, users are able to expediently present their personal information and adeptly manage people's impression on them across various communicative activities and achieve significant results. Short video platforms represented by TikTok facilitate connections among users, shaping a new public opinion field in which impression management and identity construction are ubiquitous. Characters in these short videos dynamically construct their identities through impression management strategies, promoting effective engagement with netizens and the achievement of specific goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Impression Management

Studies on impression management originated from self-representation research of Goffman in the late 1950s and Jones in the early 1960s. Goffman (1959) believes the process of interpersonal interaction is a "theatrical performance", individuals are "actors" and communicative behaviors are "performance" (Wu & Feng, 2023). People do self-representation through verbal or non-verbal symbols in interaction and control others to produce specific impression.

In the 1980s, people realized that appropriate impression management was an important tool for interpersonal interaction and used to explain various social behaviors. Scholars (Arkin, 1981; Baumeister, 1982; Tetlock, 1985) argued impression management was pervasive in social life. It was necessary for social members to create acceptable images by appropriate self-representation. Later, impression management was viewed as the act of purposefully controlling information about people and events to audiences (Wang & Zhang, 2015).

Leary and Kowalski (1990) pointed out that impression management encompassed two interconnected dimensions: impression motivation, which pertained to personal willingness to manage self-impression, and impression construction, which involved the active efforts individuals took to create a certain impression. The realization of impression management requires specific "techniques", which are impression management strategies. However, Goffman did not describe these systematic strategies or ways of presenting them through verbal or non-verbal symbols (Dunne et al, 2021). So, scholars such as Mohamed et al. (1999) and Hooghiemstra (2000) tried to make this division.

The impression management has been widely used in psychology and economics, with studies predominantly focusing on individuals, companies and governments (Dunne et al, 2021; Li & Xu, 2020; Wu & Feng, 2023). On social media platforms, such as WeChat (Huang, M., 2020) and livestream (Wang, 2022), people selectively present their information, which is different from the daily life. So, impression management strategies are reconstructed to align with the digital context. People also use short video as a vehicle to manage the impression and achieve specific goals.

2.2. Studies on Identity Construction

As a dynamic concept, identity refers to "social positioning of self and others" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and is a subject in

psychology, sociology, and linguistics. In linguistics, scholars are interested in the intricate relationship between language and identity (De Fina et al., 2006). With the rise of social constructivism, it holds identity is continuously constructed and dynamically negotiated in interaction (Chen, 2018). So, Chen (2013) proposed the concept of “pragmatic identity” based on Tracy’s (2013) identity definition under the rhetorical and cultural perspectives. This concept refers to identity people show or use in interaction, distinguishing it from static identity. It helps people to manage interpersonal relationships and achieve communicative purposes.

Nowadays, online communication generates new contextual features, identity construction in this field attracts scholars’ attention. In network context, studies explore online identity construction of immigrants (Perelmutter, 2018) and international students (Li & Huang, 2021), shedding light on the diverse ways in which groups construct their identities in virtual environment. Besides, scholars (Badarneh, 2020; Lu & Zhan, 2020; Liu, 2022; Yang & Ren, 2020) explore how netizens construct self or group identity in crisis contexts and probe into identity construction in online commerce. Studies also focus on academic discourse (Liao & Weng, 2022), conciliation discourse (Feng, 2020) and business discourse (Ran & Fan, 2020), as well as interactive features of identity construction (Yuan, 2022), which means people choose, construct and negotiate identity in alignment with their communicative goals.

And studies on identity construction in short videos have emerged as a current and significant trend. People construct different identities to enrich the content of their short videos, infusing them with entertaining factors and pandering to the needs of users. Therefore, studies on identity construction of characters in short videos have practical significance.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Impression management is divided into impression motivation and impression construction. In developing impression motivation, people desire to create a favorable image and control other’s ideas about them. With this motivation, people will consider impression construction, which is realized through impression management strategies.

Mohamed, Gardner and Parlillo (1999) classify impression management strategies into two categories: acquisitive strategies, people try to leave a positive impression on others; protective strategies, people try to minimize their shortcomings to avoid leaving a negative impression on others, as figure 1:

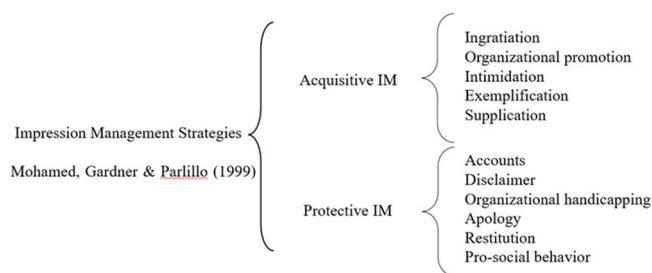


Figure 1. Impression Management Strategies

The impression management theory and strategies in real

life are also applicable to the online environment. The “stage” in online communities is an extension of the “stage” in daily life, and they interconnected (He, 2011).

3.2. Methodology

The data used in the article has been collected from the TikTok short video platform, specifically focusing on contents produced by the user “Zhang Cailing”. 50 short videos, issued by user Zhang Cailing, have been collected as a sample. The study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the data. First, the author observed the videos, figured out the impression management strategies used by characters in the videos; then, the author analyzed the identities constructed by characters through different impression management strategies; lastly, the meanings and features of impression management strategies and identity construction were analyzed.

According to the above, the essay aims to address the following questions:

- (1) What are impression management strategies used by characters in short videos?
- (2) What types of identities are constructed by characters in short videos through impression management strategies?
- (3) What are features and significance of impression management strategies and identity construction in short videos?

4. Discussions

4.1. Impression Management Strategies and Types of Identities in Short Videos

Zhang Cailing is a short video blogger on the TikTok platform, she and an Australian man form a cross-cultural family with two kids. In her family, she and her husband have different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, her videos often highlight the humorous aspect of her family, which serves as a unique and appealing subject for netizens. The study mainly talks about impression management strategies and identity construction among 50 short videos. The topics of 50 short videos are as follows in figure 2:

Topic of videos	Numbers of videos (50)
Parent-child education	8
Professional experience	2
Cultural difference	17
Family life	18
Social communication	5

Figure 2. Topics of Short Videos

By observing these 50 short videos, it can be found that characters in short videos mainly construct 5 types of identities through different impression management strategies.

4.1.1. Identity as Promoters

In short videos, impression management strategies involve verbal and non-verbal elements. And protective impression management strategies are applied to acquire a certain image. Firstly, the blogger Zhang Cailing narrates the whole content of video using accounts. At the half of videos, the character

will introduce a product. She accounts why this product is good to purchase and what people can acquire from this product. Among verbal elements, the character uses accounts, promotion, ingratiation and pro-social behavior to convey her expertise as a qualified promoter and to assure viewers of the product's benefit. Thus, these verbal elements help the character acquire the identity of a persuasive and knowledgeable promoter.

In addition to account the reasons of buying this product, the character also uses non-verbal elements to enhance her persuasive power. She inserts the pictures of the product and shows how to use the product in her family, suggesting that she has personal experience with the product. This demonstration implies that she is speaking from her experience and that people who want to purchase the product can believe her. By focusing on consumers' interests, the character further testifies her identity as a trustworthy and consumer-centric promoter.

4.1.2. Identity as Operators

As a public figure, it is crucial for Zhang Cailing to utilize creative and distinctive methods to captivate netizens' attention or imagination. Although her family members provide the content of videos for her, the ways how she presents the content to netizens are still important. Among verbal elements, Zhang speaks in mandarin with Dongbei accent, which adds a humorous twist to her videos. In this aspect, Zhang adopts ingratiation to shorten the psychological distance with netizens.

Besides, Zhang makes use of various non-verbal elements to enhance the appeal of her videos. She incorporates popular music with a lower volume than her speaking voice. And she also presents words she says in vibrant and visually striking fonts, which stimulate netizens' visual effects. When Zhang talks about important part of the content, she also edits videos to reproduce real situation, making her content more engaging. Through these strategies, Zhang's videos become appealing and meaningful, and she also constructs the identity as a skilled and artistic operator.

4.1.3. Identity as Sharers

The character is aware that to maintain people's interest, she must keep the trend and consistently deliver different contents. Therefore, Zhang regularly uploads a new video with exemplification strategy. She knows that people who want to watch her videos form psychological expectations, which is a potential rule that she must adhere to.

Besides, to meet the needs of most citizens, she ensures that her short videos are meaningful in both contents and forms. In video, Zhang shares amusing anecdotes and experiences from her family life. She uses cross-cultural background to her advantage, shares something about cross-cultural communication with ingratiation strategy. Zhang's unique family situation, particularly her son Zhang Natie's disinterest in learning English and his obsession with Dongbei culture all become compelling topics among netizens. So, Zhang takes this point to share with netizens and realizes her identity.

4.1.4. Identity as Leaders

In 50 videos, the representation of Zhang's identity as a leader is least. However, Zhang's pro-social behaviors shows that she is considerate for her staff. She actively takes her husband's advice to compensate the staff for their hard work with actual benefits, which is also ingratiation.

Besides, she also performs her duty of a leader, before asking the staff to finish things, she takes initiative to

accomplish them herself, which is exemplification. This sets a precedent for her team and reinforces her role as a leader who is willing to invest personal power in the success of the group. Through these actions, Zhang not only earns the respect and trust of her team, but also ensures her identity as a capable and compassionate leader.

4.1.5. Identity as Masters of Cross-cultural Knowledge

In videos, Zhang's family members have different cultural backgrounds. She takes the opportunity to account for the netizens about another cultural phenomenon. And she also talks about Dongbei culture expressed by her son, which is promotion. By doing so, she helps more people understand different cultures, which also shows her own mastery of two cultures.

Although Zhang masters two countries' culture, her efforts to draw people's attention to Chinese culture demonstrate her cultural confidence. This confidence, combined with her willingness to share her family's experiences, leave a positive impression on netizens, which is also ingratiation. Through her videos, Zhang fosters a sense of cultural awareness and appreciation, contributing to a more inclusive and informed online community.

4.2. Features and Significance of Impression Management Strategies and Identity Construction

Characters in short videos mainly use acquisitive strategies, ingratiation, promotion, exemplification to manage their impression. Besides, account is not aimed at protecting their original impression, but is used to acquire a new image. And according to different topics of videos, the character constructs the identities based on these topics through impression management strategies. This not only brings humor to netizens, but also conveys the character's attitude to life, tolerance and acceptance of cultural and cognitive difference. These qualities have speculative significance and diversified values for the public and offer insights and inspiration.

The public figure forms a likable image through different strategies, which matches people's perception. In new media context, online impression management has a far-reaching impression, and public expression can even affect social benefits. Therefore, this also helps the public figures to standardize their expression and contributes to the development of mass media.

The implications of Zhang Cailing's impression management extend beyond her personal brand. She serves as a role model for others in public eyes, her approaches help to foster a more positive online environment, which can have a ripple effect on social interactions and the overall culture in new media context.

5. Conclusion

The study takes impression management as a theoretical guide to explore impression management strategies and identity construction of characters in short videos. It shows that the character mainly constructs five types of identities, promoters, operators, sharers, leaders, masters of cross-cultural knowledge by acquisitive strategies ingratiation, promotion, exemplification, and accounts, which is used as an acquisitive strategy and protective strategies apology and pro-social behavior. The findings of this study suggest that these strategies help users of short video platforms to play a positive

role in improving their self-image and network influence. Furthermore, the study also provides references for the online public's impression management strategies.

However, this study still exists limitations. The sample size, consisting of only 50 short videos, is not enough to include all kinds of identities and strategies of impression management. In the future, we can collect more data to find more types of identity and new impression management strategies. Besides, exploring more public figures' strategies to manage their images could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor. Without her enlightening advice and instructions, I cannot finish this essay better. She pointed the way to my essay improvement and I also learned a lot in this process. Last, I express thanks to my friends for their support and my parents for their love, caring and sacrifices for my future.

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