

A Study on the Discourse Construction of WeChat Salesmen's Personal Identities: Based on Data from the Moments of WeChat

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Abstract

The analysis in this paper examines how the salesmen construct their identities through the Chinese messaging app WeChat by applying Karen Tracy's identity theory. Using a data set consisting of 17 WeChat salesmen's discursive practices posted in the Moments of WeChat, the analysis found out 6 types of identities constructed, which are as salesmen, product users, competitors, evaluators, friends and organizers. Both rhetorical and cultural perspectives are adopted in analyzing how these identities are constructed.

Keywords

WeChat salesmen, discursive practices, identity construction, moments in WeChat

1. Introduction

WeChat salesmen, a kind of online sellers, occurred in 2013 in China and sold their commodities through two ways: WeChat public accounts (Business-to-Customer) and the Moments of WeChat (Customer-to-Customer) (Su, 2015). WeChat salesmen are common WeChat users, maintaining relationships with others through this APP, but at the same time they are also salesmen, taking WeChat as their shops, which makes their identities more colorful than those of the traditional salesmen. This paper looked into the discursive practices WeChat salesmen posted in the Moments of WeChat, summarized the characteristics and analyzed what identities have been constructed through these discursive practices and how.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between language and identity is an important research trend of the relational turn in interpersonal pragmatics and it has aroused the interest of many western scholars (Locher, 2008, 2013;

Haugh & Mills, 2013). Scholars analyzed the relationship between language and identity in different contexts, such as daily conversations, institutional conversations and so on (De Fina, 2006, Benwell & Stoke, 2006; Tracy, 2013). A social constructivism approach is widely accepted and adopted in their analysis. The theory holds that identity construction is a dynamic process that takes place in concrete interactional occasions. It results from the process of negotiation and entails lots of discursive work (De Fina, 2006). Recently, a series of columns on the topic of identity construction has been set up in some leading pragmatic journals such as *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics*, and the concept “pragmatic identity” (Chen, 2013) has been proposed and adopted by lots of researches, all of which make this topic more popular.

Besides, the rapid development of internet technology makes computer-mediated communication possible and popular, and also makes it a new trend of linguistic research. Many scholars (Sage Lambert Graham, 2007; Chai, 2005; Zhang & Dong, 2008) began to study language use in CMC. As a new group of salesmen who sell their products and communicate with their customers through social software, WeChat salesmen draws scholars’ concern. However, recent research findings are mostly conducted from the perspective of economics (Yu & Xu, 2015), marketing (Zhang & Guo, 2015), communication (Gong, 2015), sociology (Li, 2015) and so on, while few researchers focus on the language WeChat salesmen use. Therefore, based on Tracy’s identity theory, this paper mainly analyzes the discursive practices WeChat salesmen posted in the Moments from the perspective of pragmatics so as to find more details about WeChat salesmen’s identity construction.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper discusses two questions: what are the characteristics of the discursive practices WeChat salesmen posted in the Moments of WeChat? What identities do WeChat salesmen construct through these discursive practices and how?

We discuss these questions based on Karen Tracy’s theory about language and identity in daily conversations. In Tracy’s theory, people’s identities include those stable identity features that exist prior to any particular situation and dynamic and situated accomplishments changing from one occasion to the next; discursive practices are talk activities that people conduct. Discursive practices include person referencing practices, speech acts, sight and sound of speech, interaction structures, language selection, style, stance, narrative, genre, etc. The relationship between discursive practices and identities is a reciprocal one, that is, the identities a person brings to an interaction influence how that person communicates while the specific discursive practices a person chooses will shape who he or she is taken to be and who the partner is taken to be (Tracy, 2013). Tracy discusses the relationship from two perspectives: the rhetorical perspective (focusing on the way discursive practices shape people’s situated identities) and the cultural perspective (focusing on the way preexisting identities shape discursive practices). Using either perspective in isolation from the other distorts how everyday talk

works. Therefore, a dialectic and bi-directional perspective which combines the two is employed in the present study.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The data in this paper were collected by the authors and their seven friends from seventeen WeChat salesmen. After getting permission from those WeChat salesmen, we got 655 screen shots about the discursive practices they posted in the Moments of WeChat and covered their private information by mosaic. According to the data we have collected, here are the main identities WeChat salesmen constructed in the Moments of WeChat through their discursive practices.

4.1 As Salesmen

Example 1: 颜膜新品: 婴儿 Spa 面膜, 一盒 10 片, 涂抹式的哦, 使用方法: 啫喱状, 没有膜布, 打开直接涂抹, 15-20 分钟清洗掉, 一袋 35 克, 一盒配送 2 个面膜勺子.

New product of Yanmo: Baby Spa masks, ten pieces in a box. Instructions: it's gel-like and no film cloth, smear on the face and stay for 15-20 minutes. There are 35g in a bag with two spoons.

Example 2: 贾彩云, 产后肥胖 140 多斤, 使用奶昔三个月, 减肥 28 斤, 累计 30 斤, 现在已经是标准体重 (配图: 减肥前后对比照).

Caiyun Jia weighs more than 70kg after giving birth. With the help of this milk shake, she has lost 15kg of weight within 3 months. Now she keeps a standard weight (Pictures: two pictures of Jia before and after drinking the milk shake).

Example 3: 这是益生菌酵母软糖, 纯天然提取物, 无副作用, 植物胶型凝胶糖果, 方便携带, 口感佳, 具有排毒养颜, 瘦身营养保健等多重功效.

This is a kind of pro-biotics yeast fudge with pure natural extracts. And it is a kind of plant gum gel candy without any side effects. It has many advantages such as being easy to carry, excellent taste, eliminating toxin, beautifying skin, keeping fit, improving health, etc.

Example 4: 补水不能停, 美丽不放假, 女人要美就要补水, 玛莎妮娜多肽水润驻颜面膜, 深度补水, 呵护干燥肌肤, 营养水分锁得住, 一贴补水, 水润更持久, 365 天焕发肌肤巅峰璀璨状态.

Keep moisturized, keep beautiful. Women need to moisturize their skin if they want to remain beautiful. Mashanina masks can moisturize your skin deeply, make your skin bright and keep it in the best state every day.

Austin held that people use language not only to describe and present the outside world, but also to conduct social action (Tracy, 2013). The discursive practices in example 1 mainly conducts one speech act: information providing. The WeChat saleswoman in this example provides specific information about the name, characteristics, usage and the content of the new product. By providing that information, she presents herself as the one who is familiar with the product. In example 2, the WeChat salesman tells the story of her customer's loss of weight after using the product. In her book *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities*, Tracy demonstrated the pragmatic functions of storytelling

such as making an argument, performing speech acts, self-presentation, etc. (Tracy, 2013). The WeChat salesman in example 2 makes an argument by telling a story: the products are really helpful for losing weight. And during the process, she conducts two speech acts: providing information about the effects of her products and advertising for her products indirectly by showing the two pictures of Jia to testify her obvious loss of weight after drinking the milk shake. In example 3 and 4, the WeChat salesmen describe the quality and effects of their products exaggeratively, advertising for their products directly. Hyperbole is frequently used in the discursive practices WeChat salesmen posted in the Moments of WeChat, which is a kind of linguistic device that can accomplish specific pragmatic function by expressing facts in an exaggerative way (Pang & Xu, 2011). WeChat salesmen usually exaggerate their products' advantages and avoid the disadvantages in order to attract others' attraction.

Various speech acts and stories about their products shape those WeChat salesmen as polite and kind who know the products well and support the products positively, which is helped by the anonymity and absence of audio-visual context in the CMC. With clear communicative purpose, those WeChat salesmen sometimes violate the quality maxim (He, 2000), overstating the effects of their products to meet people's wishes.

Table 1. WeChat Salesmen's Discursive Practices As Salesmen

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	mostly intimate address forms
speech acts	information providing, advertising, evaluating, etc.
style	direct
narrative	mostly about the process and good effects of using their products
stance	familiar with the products, supportive of the products
rhetorical device	hyperbole

4.2 As Product Users

Example 5: 干爽度测试汉堡下午三点多一直到洗澡前才换下的一片纸尿裤, 现在要睡觉啦, 一整片好平整不起坨不断层哒, 压一压, 毫无反渗, 干爽度完美! 要想宝宝屁屁干爽, 一定要选择不反渗的纸尿裤哦, 你家的尿裤有如此干爽么? 赶紧来找我了解凯尔得乐吧 (配图: 干爽度测试小视频).

Test for hygroscopicity: Hanbao has been wearing this paper diaper from 3 p.m. until taking a bath in the evening. Now he is going to sleep, and the paper diaper still keeps smooth and dry. I press it hard and there is no reverse osmosis at all. Perfect hygroscopicity. So if you want to keep your baby's bottom dry and clean, you'd better choose the paper diaper with no reverse osmosis. Can your paper diaper keep dry and clean? Come to me and try to know more about CareDaily (with video about the process of the test).

Example 6: 又开一盒女皇, 说不清这是我开的第几盒了, 只要是我自己卖的产品我都坚持在用. 从 sola 到女皇, 这一年多来蓄蓄真的完全不长痘, 不痛经了. 好多宝宝都知道我以前是个爱长痘的肤质, 一到换季就不停歇的冒痘, 现在再怎么熬夜也没长过了. 确实感觉到女皇有调理我的身体, 排毒, 改善酸性体质, 真的棒棒哒.

Here is another box of Nv Huang. I can't remember how many boxes of Nv Huang I have eaten. I insist on using what I sell including sola and Nv Huang. I have never experienced acne and dysmenorrhea since I began using them. Many of my friends know that I always have acne, especially during the changes of seasons. But now even though I stay up late, there is no acne on my face. Nv Huang is actually helpful in detoxing and reducing acidity.

Example 7: 这是我在营养俱乐部不到一年的改变, 每每看到这些照片都非常的激动, 从迷茫的眼神到自信, 从不会笑到爱笑, 我使用营养餐 45 天塑形 9 斤, 越来越爱现在的自己了, 我可以, 你也可以的 (配图: 减肥前后对比照).

The pictures show the great changes of me in less than a year, which always makes me excited when I saw them. I experienced great changes from empty eyes to great confidence and from no smiles to broad smiles. Thanks to the "nutritious meal", I lost 9kg in 45 days and feel better. I can succeed, so can you.

Most WeChat salesmen become product sellers because of their good experiences of the products. In the Moments, WeChat salesmen post details about the process of using the products through storytelling and lots of first-person pronouns such as "I", "myself" and so on. For example, in example 5, the mother tests the hygroscopicity of her baby's paper diaper, the main product she sells in the Moments. During this process, she provides many details about how long a piece of the diaper can endure and how it is like after being used for several hours; in example 6 and 7, these WeChat salesmen sell skin care products and nutritious food. They construct themselves as consumers of the products by showing how they use their products and what great effects the products bring to them.

By presenting details about their products, talking about their experiences of them and making favorable evaluations, WeChat salesmen build themselves as real consumers, attracting more and more friends in the Moments to buy their products. However, their identity construction is goal-oriented and the lack of visual and paralinguistic cues gives WeChat salesmen more freedom to present their products selectively. They describe their products positively and exaggeratively most of the time with fewer negative descriptions.

Table 2. WeChat Salesmen's Discursive Practices As Product Users

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	pronoun address forms (I, myself, etc.)
speech acts	information providing, evaluating
style	direct

narrative	mostly about how they use their own products
stance	as consumers and product users
rhetorical device	hyperbole

4.3 As Competitors

Example 8: 这就是所谓低价, 所谓的做爆款, 你买个假包包, 假皮带, 假手表, 也就算了! 这就是圣罗兰三件套, 39.9 你敢用吗? 谁敢用, 私聊我, 我把她推荐给你买! 你敢用我买了送给你也行 (配图: 39.9 一套圣罗兰卖家的朋友圈内容).

This is the so-called low price and hot style. Maybe you don't mind buying fake handbags, belt, or watches, etc., but, this is the three-piece suit of YSL for just 39.9 RMB! Do you dare to use it? Talk to me and I'll give you her ID or buy it for you if you say yes! (picture: information about the YSL for 39.9 RMB).

Example 9: 有的地方祛痘 5800, 另一个地方 3800, 过几天你又听到说某个店 1800, 甚至还有某家店只要 800. 小布丁 1 元, 也没耽误哈根达斯 40 元一个! 夏利 3 万, 也没有耽误宝马上百万! 这世上从来就没有物美价廉的东西! 要相信任何东西都是一分价钱一分货, 任何一种商品存活下来绝对不是因为价格, 而是品质和服务, 这里我们永远用良心打造最完美的你! 什么都可以打折, 但是自己的美丽不可以!

Maybe you've heard that acne treatment costs 5800 RMB in some stores, 3800 RMB in another, and there are also some other stores just asking for 1800 RMB or even 800 RMB. However, it is impossible to find something with high quality and low price in the world. For example, for ice cream, Xiao Buding just costs 1 RMB while Haagen-Dazs costs 40 RMB; for cars, Xia Li just costs 30,000 RMB while BMW needs more than a million RMB. Please believe that you get what you pay for. It is good quality and service that make a commodity popular. In our shop, we work for your beauty conscientiously. You can never be stingy for your beauty!

Same as physical store sales, there are also competitions among WeChat salesmen, but the ways of competing are different: WeChat salesmen compete with others mainly through delivering relative information in the Moments of WeChat. For example, the WeChat salesman in example 8 describes another WeChat salesman's products as "so-called". Generally, the word "so-called" is used to show one's negative attitude to something, disclose and criticize its irrationality (Zhou, 2009). In this example, the WeChat salesman indicates that the commodities from another WeChat salesman are fake by the "so-called" description and by classifying them and other false products into the same category, which shapes a competitive relationship between the two WeChat salesmen in this example.

The ninth example is from a WeChat saleswoman who works in a chain store for acne treatment. She lists several lower prices from other WeChat salesmen, indicating her pricing may be higher. She makes an inference from the relationship between the quality and price in the ice cream and car industry and draws the conclusion that one gets what he pays for (there is no such thing as that of in high quality and

low price). Based on the analogy with ice cream and car industry, she testifies that the high price is reasonable for products of a high quality. Therefore, she then makes promises about the good quality of her products and her considerate services, which might be at a high price. In the end, she conforms to the potential hearers' thirst for beauty and tries to persuade them to pay more attention to quality rather than price. In this way, she identifies herself as an excellent competitor for the treatment of acne.

Table 3. WeChat Salesmen's Discursive Practices As Competitors

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	self-references (I, we, etc.)
speech acts	information providing, comparing, evaluating, promising, persuading, etc.
style	indirectly
stance	familiar with commodities from others, supportive of his or her own products
rhetorical device	analogy

4.4 As Evaluators

Example 10: 别人的客户都挺顺眼，而我客户（展开可见以下内容）我客户早就不能用顺眼来形容了，那是男神女神你懂吗（笑脸）气质优雅，美腻大方！希望我的客户看到这条给我多介绍点客户（笑脸）90°小弯腰致敬我的客户（配图：弯腰致敬），谢谢你们的支持！（笑脸）。

Your clients are nice, but my clients are... (unfold and read the following content) My clients are far beyond being nice, they are gorgeous, and they are my gods and goddesses! (smiling face) They are elegant and attractive! I hope my clients see these words and then introduce more customers to me. (smiling face) Bend over to salute my clients. (Picture: an action of bow) Thank you for your support! (smiling face).

Example 11: 卖衣服的可太难了，薄的你嫌薄，厚的嫌厚，买黑的嫌老，白的不耐脏，玫红色太土，绿色过时快，黄色太艳还怕招虫，大版的嫌闷，嫌压个，小版的嫌短，嫌腰冷，带钻的怕掉，净版的没图案，配毛的嫌毛长，合适的没特色，特色的又不合适，便宜的怕质量太差，质量好的还嫌贵。你都赶上设计师了，衣服要是会说话，还嫌你长得磕碜那。哼。

Selling clothes is too hard. You criticize the thick one for being too thick, the filmy one for being too gauzy, the black one for looking old, the white one for becoming dirty quickly, the rosy one for its old-fashion, the green one for being a fad, the yellow one for being too bright and attracting moths, the big one for being too heavy, the small one for being too short and too cold, the diamond one for shedding off, the solid one for being unfashionable, the furry one for its long fur, the formfitting one for being too ordinary, the distinctive one for being unfit, the cheap one for its poor quality, the good one for its high price. You are so picky that the clothes may be unwilling to be yours for your plain-looking.

Different with face-to-face communication in traditional physical store sales, WeChat salesmen sell their goods and communicate with consumers in a computer-mediated context. In such a virtual context,

the absence of audio-visual context makes exaggerative and flattering expressions more natural and impoliteness more common. For example, WeChat saleswoman in example 10 builds herself (the speaker) as a seller by addressing the hearers with “clients” and “you” and flatters her clients by calling them gods and goddesses. So many emoticons (smiley face and the picture of bowing) compensates for an absence of visual context, making her compliments more polite and sincere. By making a compliment to her clients (“gorgeous”, “goddess”), the WeChat saleswoman establishes herself as an easy-going person, keep a close relationship with her clients and attract more people to be her clients. However, the situation is a bit different in example 11. The WeChat saleswoman in this case takes herself as a clothing seller and the hearers as consumers (“you”). The address form “clothing seller” not “I” makes what she says more objective, indicating that the following opinions are actually what all clothing sellers think about their consumers. She shows her sympathy for the sellers and her criticism of the buyers. Her criticism of the consumers’ censorious action violates the approbation maxim (He, 2000), but actually, this is an adaption to the virtual context. The formal and contextual qualities or constraints of CMC intensify the maxim of efficiency while sacrificing the maxim of politeness in comparison with face-to-face conversation (Benwell & Stoke, 2006).

Table 4. WeChat Salesmen’s Discursive Practices As Evaluators

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	pronoun address forms (I, you, we, etc.), relation address forms (clients, etc.)
speech acts	evaluating, appreciating
style	evaluate directly, informal, sometimes impolite
stance	as sellers
rhetorical device	hyperbole

4.5 As Friends

Example 12: 突然间有了很多的感慨，身为子女的我们奔波在外，求学在外，是不是大部分都在不经意间忽略了自己的父母？最在乎我们的往往是最容易被忽略的，怀着一颗感恩的心，多去关怀一下我们的父母吧！

Suddenly I’ve got lots to convey. We children often study and work in places far away from our parents. Do we really care for our parents as we should do? We always neglect those who really love us. So care for our parents and accompany them with gratitude as possible as you can.

Example 13: 世界上怎么会有仓鼠这么软绵绵的存在啊，一窝窝的要被萌死啦。

How downy the hamsters are! These nests of hamsters are so cute!

Example 14: 我家宝宝第一次参加舞蹈考级，跳的还不错 (附: 孩子跳舞视频)。

My dear baby takes the dance test for the first time, well done! (with video clip of the baby’s dancing).

Although WeChat salesmen always advertise for their commodities, as WeChat users, they also post

what they think or do in daily lives as common users, which is an adaption to the characteristics of WeChat as a social software. Example 12 comes from a WeChat saleswoman selling skincare products. She posits herself as a child by the first-person pronoun of “we” and gives suggestions about “caring for parents” in this case, which has nothing to do with her commodities. The girl in example 13 sells weight-losing products, but in this case, she expresses her love for a hamster and constructs herself as a pet lover. In example 14, the WeChat saleswoman identifies herself as a mother through the kinship address form “my baby” and the positive evaluation of her baby’s dancing. WeChat salesmen are common WeChat users. This preexisting identity shapes their discursive practices. They post discursive practices like any other common users in the Moments. At the same time, their choices of the discursive practices relating to real daily life also shape them as nice and empathetic friends, which is helpful for getting trust from others and attracting more consumers.

Table 5. WeChat Salesmen’s Discursive Practices As Friends

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	intimacy address forms, pronoun address forms (I, we, etc.), kinship address forms (my baby, etc.), relation address forms (friends, etc.), name address forms
speech acts	suggesting, praising, etc.
style	informal
stance	as children, pet lover, parents, etc.

4.6 As Organizers

Example 15: (晒你的女神出门“必备神器”) 一直给宝宝们种草, 突然也很想知道你们有什么好用的出门必备神器? 所以大家一起来分享吧~宝宝们都分享一个你觉得好用的化妆单品&护肤单品!! 随机抽三名送一疗程食瘦草!! 截止时间: 3/6 晚 18:00!!

List your necessary cosmetics. I always recommend cosmetics to you. Today, share your favorite cosmetics in your opinion and I will send gifts (Shi Shoucao) to the three of you who are chosen randomly. Deadline: 6:00 p.m. 3rd June.

Example 16: (感恩粉丝, 答题抢券啦) 说到感恩节, 怎么少了感谢我的宝贝们呢? 不论是已经购买的宝宝还是没有购买过的宝宝, 我都真心感谢大家, 谢谢你们天天看着我唠叨, 天天关注着我, 超级爱你们哦! 但是一句谢谢完全不够, 所以我又要任性哒给大家福利啦! 猜猜医容堂品牌今年刚过了几周年庆, 评论中回复答案, 答对就送 20 元现金券.

Discount coupon to dear fans. On this Thanksgiving day, I must thank my babies (clients). Whether you have bought my products or not, I really appreciate you for your attention. But a verbal thank you is not enough, I will send you discount coupons if you provide the right answer to the question “How many anniversaries have we celebrated?”. RMB 20 cash coupons for the lucky guys with the right

answer:

Many WeChat salesmen often initiate interactions to attract others' attention to their products and build themselves as kind and generous friends to their customers. WeChat salesmen usually address the hearers with "babies" in a polite way. This intimacy address form helps to shorten the social distance and build an intimate relationship between them and the hearers, and make themselves more sincere and friendly. During the interaction, WeChat salesmen take their products or discount coupons as prizes, which actually aims to popularize their products. For example, in example 15, she invites hearers to discuss a popular topic among women and award someone with her products. And in example 16, although the WeChat saleswoman is appreciating friends, what she really aims to do is to organize people to talk about her products and the brand and make more people know about her commodities.

Table 6. WeChat Salesmen's Discursive Practices As Organizers

discursive practices	specific performances
person-referencing practices	pronoun address forms(I, we, you, etc.), intimacy address forms (baby, babies, etc.)
speech acts	suggesting, appreciating, information providing, etc.
style	polite
stance	as friends, as sellers, as organizers

5. Conclusion

WeChat salesmen construct various identities in the Moments. Those identities are not independent of each other. Rather, they overlap and influence each other. The information they post in the Moments may build several identities and one of them is the most conspicuous. In addition, the virtual context of computer-mediated communication provides a free environment for WeChat salesmen to post their discursive practices purposefully. It is possible that some information they post in the Moments are false and the identities they construct in the Moments might be fake, which is a topic not discussed in this paper. It is worthy of thorough research with the help of a larger number of data set.

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