

Visual Rhetoric in Wechat Moments—A Research Based on Virtual Ethnography

Wangrou Liu

Northwestern Polytechnical University, China

Email: xgdwgyylwr@163.com

Manuscript received September 11, 2023; revised October 30, 2023; accepted November 30, 2023; published April 16, 2024

Abstract—As a typical representative, Wechat Moments highly integrates virtual space and real life, within which the communication mostly takes place between acquaintances. Therefore, Wechat Moments has become an important stage for individuals, especially college students, to express themselves and establish and manage their personal images. Self-compiled information, including various visual elements such as texts, photos, emojis, pictures etc. in Wechat Moments is often carefully designed and selected, which will have an ideological influence on the reader. Therefore, this paper takes the visual rhetoric theory as the theoretical framework, and the virtual ethnography as the research method, to investigate the behavior of college students in using Wechat Moments to achieve rhetorical purposes to establish their personal images. The results of the categorical analysis indicate that most of the people's Wechat Moments is about their daily life, generally for sharing or remembering, wanting to show their positive side of life. Then, the content analysis suggests that both the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning of the visual elements should be noticed. Finally, the rhetorical analysis provides an interpretation of the connotations of posting Wechat Moments.

Keywords—visual rhetoric, Wechat Moments, virtual ethnography, visual image

I. INTRODUCTION

At present, the Internet affects our social life in many ways, the most important of which is to greatly enrich the way people communicate with each other. More and more people are choosing to communicate with others on the Internet owing to its convenience and low-cost. In this case, a variety of online communities have emerged. Different from the community in our real life, online community break the spatial restrictions and is no longer a physical location. However, it is also composed of various relationships such as friendship and family affection. And Wechat Moments is a typical representative. Compared with Weibo, Zhihu and other highly public social media, the communication within the Wechat Moments mostly takes place between acquaintances, highly integrating virtual space and real life, because only WeChat friends can see and participate in the information communication in Wechat Moments. Therefore, Wechat Moments has become an important stage for individuals to express themselves and establish and manage their personal images.

College students are an important group using WeChat, and they are at the stage of prominent self-consciousness. Because of the expansion of the social circle, they pay more attention to the maintenance of the online community. In this process, they realize the importance of their own image in social life, so they are very sensitive to the evaluation and opinion of others. Therefore, they tend to express and show themselves through the information post in their Wechat

Moments, which is usually combined of photos, nonphotographic images like memes and emojis, accompanying texts and so on. In particular, photos in moments are often carefully designed and selected, containing rich emotions and information. Therefore, these visual images often directly attract readers' attention and can enhance readers' recall and perception of the relevant written words. And it will eventually provide the reader with an ideological influence, that is, to achieve the rhetorical purpose through visual imagery, so as to convey the connotations [1]. So, what are the characteristics of college students' choice of visual image in their Wechat Moments? What kind of message do they want to convey? How does it affect the building of their personal images? Based on this, this paper takes the visual rhetoric theory as the theoretical framework, and takes the virtual ethnography as the research method, to investigate the behavior of college students in using Wechat Moments to achieve rhetorical purposes to establish their personal images.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rhetoric originated in ancient Greece. Aristotle believed that rhetoric was “the function of finding possible ways of persuasion on any issue”, that is, emphasizing the use of speech to persuade the audience. And traditional rhetoric is mainly limited to the rhetoric of language. In 1970, the Speech Communication Association hosted the National Rhetoric Conference, at which the members of the Conference agreed that traditional rhetoric should adapt to the development of the times to expand the scope of research, such as informal dialogue, mass media information, chanting, gestures, and cultural symbols, etc. [2]. With the extensive development of this new rhetoric movement, the research dimension of rhetoric has been continuously expanded, and visual rhetoric then has really drawn people's attention, becoming an important branch of rhetoric research.

Nowadays, most of the research on visual rhetoric focuses on the analysis of print advertising, which originates from Roland Barthes, who is the founder of modern semiotics and cultural studies. Roland Barthes proposed the concept of myth based on the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. He believes that the decoding of image symbols has two layers of signification. The first layer is the signifier, while the other, the most important, is the second layer—the signifying aspect of ideology. In his opinion, visual design provides a wealth of “ideological signifiers”, involving more complex social or cultural implications, which are often related to the existing ideology and cultural traditions of society, that is, rising to the level of myth [3]. Existing empirical studies have applied this understanding to the

analysis of films, posters, short videos, visual data, enterprise reports, etc. For example, Michelle Greenwood, Gavin Jack and Brad Haylock discussed the rhetorical function of visual design in the annual report of corporate, and further analyzed its influence and role in establishing the corporate image. Then, similarly, it can be transferred to the visual rhetoric effect of self-compiled photos and texts in Wechat Moments, as well as the building and influence on personal images. However, in their study, they argue that “Current analytical approaches to visual rhetoric are either predominantly theoretical (with little structured guidance) or procedural (with little acknowledgement of important epistemic questions).” that is, there is a gap “between theory-driven and procedure-driven techniques for visual analysis.” So, they put forward a new analytical framework, which is also the analysis steps used in this paper.

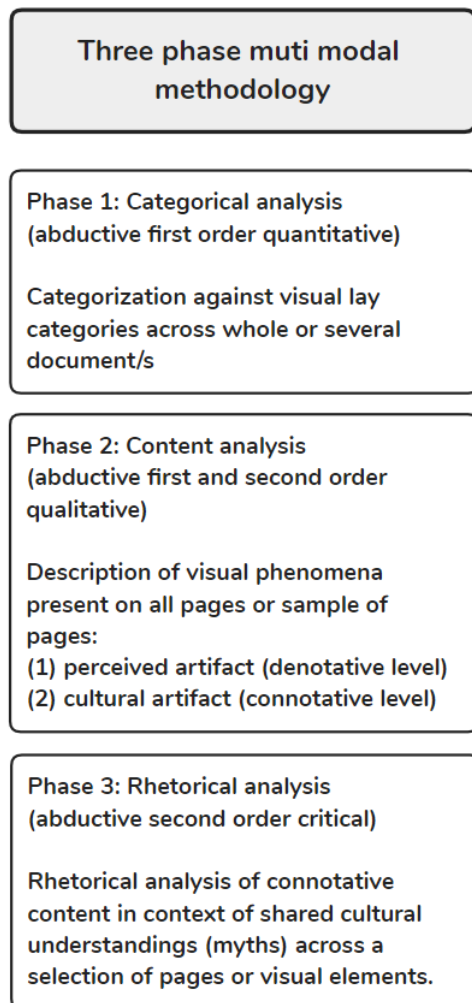


Fig. 1. Methodology for analysis of visual Rhetoric put forward by Michelle Greenwood, Gavin Jack, and Brad Haylock.

Fig. 1 portrays the three phase muti modal methodology. The first is the categorical analysis, that is, to classify visual elements according to common sense or typical practice, which can provide first order meaning to a limited extent. The second phase-the content analysis-involves abstract explanations of the social world and thus provides second order meanings. Michelle Greenwood, Gavin Jack and Brad Haylock consider the content analysis of Phase 2 as both descriptive and interpretive. So, based on Barthes’s distinction between a denotative and connotative reading of

signs, they identify two levels of content analysis: a perceptual or denotative description of the perceived artifact, and a connotative description of the cultural artifact. They explained in the research that “the denotative level of analysis describes the signifier and responds to the question “what is it?” (e.g., a picture of a rose)” while “the connotative level brings out that which is signified, “what does it represent to you, make you think of or feel?” (e.g., I think of love)” [1]. The third phase is rhetorical analysis, that is, to analyze the rhetorical function of each visual element. This requires the researcher’s priori knowledge, which can be explained explicitly in the context of the specific cultural milieu.

There are various of design elements in visual discourse, such as photography, nonphotographic images, typography and layout and so on. But the self-compiled information in Wechat Moments mainly involves photography and text in relation to image. Therefore, this paper focuses on information that contains photographs or pictures.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

Virtual ethnography is the process of constructing ethnography in the network virtual environment, which is the adjustment and improvement of traditional ethnography research methods. The traditional research field is a specific physical space within a certain region, with clear boundaries. However, in virtual ethnography, the research field refers to cyberspace and, in a sense, the so-called virtual community. This virtual environment transcends the limits of shared geographic space and is based on the common interests of community members [4].

In the virtual fieldwork, the participation and observation of specific cases is still the basis for ethnographic research [5]. However, due to different research environments, the way and content of observation are different from those in real life. It does not need to be done face to face, but through various communication platforms on the Internet [6]. Besides, the content of observation is transformed to text, images and other symbols, as well as the social interaction in the network virtual space. In addition to participating in observation, online interview is also an important way to obtain information, which generally requires the use of online chat tools [5].

Wechat Moments is not a public social platform. So, only WeChat friends can participate in observing the information in it. For further understanding of the observed objects, interviews can be conducted through the platform. First of all, the observation object comes from the author’s Wechat Moments, most of whom are 20–25 years old. According to the activity of Wechat Moments, age, educational background and other indicators, we can make initial observation, and then judge which users are suitable for further analysis and research.

Because this paper mainly analyzes the visual rhetoric function of self-compiled information in Wechat Moments, it mainly focuses on users with high activity and more photos. So, 4 interviewees are determined eventually. In this process, it is necessary to investigate the general background of the interviewees, so as to facilitate the analysis of their information.

The observation conducted initially mainly focus on objects’ online behaviors in their Wechat Moments. The

author establishes contact with the interviewees through comments, likes and private messages, analyzing the texts, pictures and other symbols using the three kinds of analysis mentioned above, and understands the rhetorical function of visual elements in combination with the author's own observation. After that, the interviewees were explained and interviewed with their consent, mainly in the form of text and WeChat voice message. Finally, the voice will be converted into text and collated and recorded.

IV. THREE ANALYSIS OF THE WECHAT MOMENTS

A. *Categorical Analysis*

"A categorial analysis was undertaken to explore the use of visual design categories" [1]. There are many different categories related to visual elements such as color, size, frequency and so on, or message content in this process of categorical analysis.

Compared with social platforms such as Weibo, WeChat has distinctive characteristics, so the messages post by its users in Wechat Moments are also different. WeChat's moments can be regarded as an "acquaintance community". Most of users in the moments are friends, relatives, classmates and other familiar people in real life. Total strangers accounts only for small proportion.

"The people who are interested in my moments must be my classmates and friends around me. We are close in age and all have the habit of browsing moments. For those people that I am unfamiliar, I will block them when I post". (Henan, female, 21 years old, undergraduate).

Therefore, in Wechat Moments, except that some people use it to post advertisements, most people mainly share fragmented information about their daily life, work and study. So, to some extent, the Wechat Moments can reflect the image of a person or what aspect he wants others to pay more attention to.

"I prefer to post daily life in Wechat Moments, mainly to record my mood at that time when things happened. I think this kind of moments will leave the impression that I'm positive and love my life." (Shanxi, female, 25 years old, postgraduate).

"When I post moments, I usually post things that are more memorable to me, because I don't want to post too much about my daily life. It makes me too talkative, as if I don't have anything serious to do". (Sichuan, female, 22 years old, postgraduate).

In addition, Wechat Moments provides users with a variety of flexible options for operation. Users can choose multiple ways to post something on moments, such as text, emoji, pictures, videos, etc. In addition to only using text or video, users can combine according to their own needs, such as a combination of text and pictures, or a combination of text and video. In terms of frequency, there are fewer people who only send text and video in Wechat Moments, so we mainly focus on the image text combination information including pictures or emoji.

"In general, I use the combination of text and photos in Wechat Moments, and I sometimes use memes, but it is relatively rare. The reason why I use this form is that it can more directly record the thing that is happening at the moment. And because there are some emotions in the

combination, it will trigger my memory more easily when I read it again later". (Shanxi, female, 25 years old, postgraduate).

"When I post to my Wechat Moments, I usually use both photos and texts, because I think that it is too monotonous to post only texts. I hope others find my posts interesting." (Sichuan, female, 22 years old, postgraduate).

B. *Content Analysis*

"Content analysis contains two levels of analysis-description of the denotative perceived message and interpretation of the connotative cultural message" [1].

In terms of the denotative level, signifiers are described. In other words, the Wechat Moments are first coded and described based on the observable social world. The visual design in Wechat Moments often contains multiple elements, and we can describe humans, objects animals and plants from the size, color and other aspects. However, all descriptions need to be adjusted according to the context. For example, trophies, coaches, athletes, etc. often appear in sports related scenes. And books, computers and so on often appear in study related scenes.

Then, as for connotative level, the items described before are then interpreted for abstract meaning. In this level, images need to be combined into a whole, and the overall analysis tends to drawn on shared common understanding. For example, the image of a man standing on the top of a mountain facing the sun can be read as a message of progression and future. And the image of a group of students holding the trophy conveys a message of achievement.

"Because I like sports, so I will post photos in Wechat Moments. Especially when I win the award in the competition, I will share the photo of our team. I think it is a very proud thing to win this trophy, so I want to share my achievement with others". (Sichuan, female, 22 years old, postgraduate).

"I often post selfies on Wechat Moments, because I think posting selfies is also a way of sharing my life. And I like selfies because I think my selfies look good and I want people to notice me". (Jilin, female, 22 years old, management trainee).

C. *Rhetorical Analysis*

Rhetorical analysis is an interpretive phase of the analysis. In this phrase, priori knowledge is used for meaningful interpretation, which reflects the common cultural understanding. Most of the friends in Wechat Moments are acquaintances in real life, so they have a common understanding of visual images to a certain extent.

In addition, as mentioned above, self-compiled information in Wechat Moments is mainly embodied in the form of photography, nonphotographic images and text in relation to image. Different elements will focus on different rhetorical effects.

1) *Photography*

Photography is the most used visual element in Wechat Moments. It is characterized by its apparent truthfulness, which makes viewer unable to distinguish between the picture of the thing and the thing itself. And because of this, it is necessary to differentiate the connoted message of the symbolic image from the denoted message of the literal message. In other words, the photographs in Wechat

Moments have been carefully selected and designed, so its connotation is expected to have effect on the viewer, that is, the person who posts in Wechat Moments assumes and expects that it will leave a certain expression on the viewers. For example, some people often post photos of travel tickets in their Wechat Moments, and the information about the destination is often the most attractive point in the photos because the photography connotes a symbolic image of pleasant life and freedom.

2) Nonphotographic images

Nonphotographic Imagery, such as drawings and simple icons also plays an important role in Wechat Moments. Different from photography which pursues apparent truthfulness, the information in nonphotographic images is obviously coded, that is, they are also rich in connotations. In Wechat Moments, in addition to photography, nonphotographic image is also a way for people to express and show themselves, which generally involves a variety of emojis, stickers and memes. In particular, meme is used the most. And these nonphotographic images are more often used to show one's mood or emotions, and they often have an exaggerated effect after being selected. However, it should be noticed that these nonphotographic images need to be explained in conjunction with the relevant text, because sometimes smiley faces images can be used to express frustration, boredom or sarcasm.

"I sometimes use emojis or memes. Generally, when I cannot express my current mood with words clearly, I will use memes, because the expression and words on them can well summarize my current mood and help me to share my thoughts." (Shanxi, female, 25 years old, postgraduate).

3) Text in relation to image

The typical function of the linguistic message is one of "anchorage", which refers to the capacity of written language to delimit the possible readings of an image [7]. That is to say, the related written text shape the meaning of an image to a large extent because its rhetorical function is to lead the audience to a particular reading of an image. Similar to headline or caption, the text in the self-compiled information in Wechat Moments also plays an important role in defining the meaning of images. For instance, the text "I've got everything I need with you here next to me." encourages us to read an image of a cake as a symbol of the love and happiness. And the text "I came for the music and stayed for the memories." leads readers to realize that the author enjoyed a lot in her participation of a dance.

However, when talking about visual rhetoric, it is also of significance to note that in the self-compiled information of Wechat Moments, in addition to the text that people edits and post by themselves, there are also some short text information embedded in other visual elements such as photos and especially those memes. That is because sometimes the meanings of those visual elements are vague. So, the relevant text information embedded in them can also help readers quickly anchor the author's real intention of choosing to use these visual elements.

"I will compile my own copy of the circle of friends carefully, because I think it can leave a good impression on others. I don't think you can casually distribute things in the

circle of friends." (Shanxi, female, 25 years old, postgraduate)

"Before posting, I will definitely think about my choice of words and sentences. Because I don't label my friends, so everyone can see my Wechat Moments, including all my relatives and those people I don't know well. So, in order to make a good impression, I will pay more attention to my choice of words and sentences." (Sichuan, female, 22 years old, postgraduate)

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explained and used the three-phase approach to analyze the Wechat Moments, and figure out how the self-compiled information affects the personal image, or what kind of impression the people who post in Wechat Moments want to leave to the public through interviews. At first, the categorical analysis provided an overview of the visual elements of the Wechat Moments. Through observation and interview, it is not difficult to find that most of the people's Wechat Moments is about their daily life, generally for sharing or remembering, wanting to show their positive side of life. Then, in content analysis, both the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning of the visual elements should be noticed. That is to say, except for literal meaning, we should also pay attention to abstract meaning in the analysis of those visual elements. And eventually, the rhetorical analysis provides an interpretation of the connotations. In Wechat Moments, the most used visual elements are photography, nonphotographic image, and text in relation to image. And no matter which one is, it will be carefully chosen and edited because every image contains one's specific intention and one's hope that others will have a better impression of them.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] M. Greenwood, G. Jack, and B. Haylock, "Toward a methodology for analyzing visual rhetoric in corporate reports," *Organizational Research Methods*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 798–827, March 2018.
- [2] Y. Lin and W. Wei, *Recognizing Visual Rhetoric*, Communication University of China Press, 2021.
- [3] R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, European Messenger, 1963.
- [4] Y. Bu, "Analysis and reflection on the fieldwork of Netnography," *Ethno-National Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 69–143, 2020.
- [5] Cao Jin, Kong Yu, and Xu Lu, "Digital ethnography: Research on mediated daily life," *Journalism Bimonthly*, vol. 2, pp. 18–149, Sep. 2018.
- [6] L. Wang and J. Lan, "The self-presentation of youth through Wechat moments—A study based on virtual ethnography," *Jinan Journal (Philosophy & Social Sciences)*, vol. 12, pp. 115–128, 2017.
- [7] R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, S. Heath, Trans. European Messenger, New York, NK: Hill & Wang, 1977.

Copyright © 2024 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).