

Article

A Contrastive Study of Identity Construction and "Humblebrag" Speech Acts on Chinese and Western Social Media Platforms

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Abstract: This research article conducts a contrastive study of identity construction and 'humblebrag' speech acts on Chinese and Western social media platforms. By analyzing linguistic patterns and cultural nuances, the study explores how individuals present themselves and negotiate social perceptions in digital spaces. Employing qualitative and quantitative methods, the findings reveal significant differences in the use of 'humblebragging' as a social strategy, influenced by cultural values and platform-specific dynamics. The discussion highlights implications for understanding online identity and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: identity construction; humblebrag; social media; cross-cultural communication; digital linguistics

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Motivation

Social media platforms have emerged as critical spaces for identity construction, enabling users to curate and project their personas through language, imagery, and interaction. The study of identity construction in this context is particularly significant as it reveals how individuals negotiate self-presentation within the constraints and affordances of digital environments. Among the myriad linguistic strategies employed, the phenomenon of "humblebragging"---a speech act that combines self-promotion with feigned modesty---has garnered attention for its nuanced role in online self-representation. This study seeks to explore how humblebragging functions as a tool for identity construction, particularly in the contrasting cultural and linguistic landscapes of Chinese and Western social media platforms [1].

The motivation for this research lies in the growing recognition that social media is not merely a technological tool but a cultural artifact shaped by the norms, values, and communicative practices of its users. Chinese and Western platforms, such as WeChat and Twitter respectively, operate within distinct socio-cultural frameworks that influence how users engage in self-presentation and interpersonal communication. For instance, collectivist values prevalent in Chinese culture may encourage speech acts that emphasize group harmony and indirectness, while individualist values in Western cultures often prioritize directness and personal achievement. These cultural orientations are likely to manifest in the ways humblebragging is performed and perceived, offering a fertile ground for comparative analysis.

Furthermore, the linguistic dimensions of humblebragging provide an additional layer of complexity. Language serves not only as a medium for communication but also as a marker of identity, reflecting cultural ideologies and social hierarchies. The choice of words, tone, and rhetorical strategies employed in humblebragging can reveal underlying attitudes toward self-promotion and humility, which are culturally contingent. By examining these linguistic patterns, this study aims to uncover how users from different

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cultural backgrounds navigate the tension between self-presentation and social expectations on digital platforms.

This research is particularly timely given the global proliferation of social media and its growing influence on interpersonal and societal dynamics. Understanding the interplay between identity construction and humblebragging across cultural contexts can provide valuable insights into the broader implications of digital communication [2, 3]. It also contributes to the ongoing discourse on how technology mediates human interaction, shaping not only individual identities but also collective cultural narratives.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the interplay between cultural norms and the linguistic phenomenon of "humblebragging" as it manifests on Chinese and Western social media platforms. Specifically, the research seeks to explore how individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds employ humblebragging as a communicative strategy to construct and negotiate their online identities. By examining the nuanced ways in which self-presentation is shaped by cultural expectations, the study endeavors to uncover the implicit values and social dynamics embedded within these digital interactions [4].

A central objective of this research is to analyze the linguistic and pragmatic features of humblebragging across the two cultural contexts. This includes identifying recurring patterns in the structure, tone, and content of humblebragging speech acts, as well as examining their reception and interpretation by online audiences. The study also aims to determine whether humblebragging serves similar or divergent functions in identity construction across Chinese and Western social media, such as signaling modesty, competence, or social status.

Another key goal is to situate humblebragging within broader cultural frameworks, exploring how societal norms and values influence its prevalence and stylistic variations. For instance, the study will consider how collectivist versus individualist orientations may shape the motivations behind humblebragging and its perceived authenticity. By doing so, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural factors mediate the intersection of self-presentation and digital communication [2, 5].

Ultimately, this study aspires to bridge gaps in the existing literature by offering a comparative perspective on humblebragging as a culturally contingent phenomenon. Through this lens, the research will illuminate the ways in which social media platforms function as arenas for identity performance, while also highlighting the cultural specificity of these performances in globalized digital spaces [6].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks on Identity Construction

Identity construction in digital spaces has been extensively examined through the lenses of self-presentation and impression management, both of which are deeply influenced by cultural and technological contexts [7, 8]. Self-presentation, as a core mechanism of identity construction, involves the deliberate crafting of one's persona to align with desired social perceptions [9]. This process is particularly salient in digital environments, where users navigate platform affordances to curate their identities. As illustrated in Figure 1, self-presentation strategies are shaped by the interplay between cultural values and the structural features of digital platforms. Cultural norms, for instance, dictate the degree to which authenticity, modesty, or self-promotion is emphasized in online interactions, thereby influencing the adoption of specific behaviors such as humblebragging or overt self-disclosure.

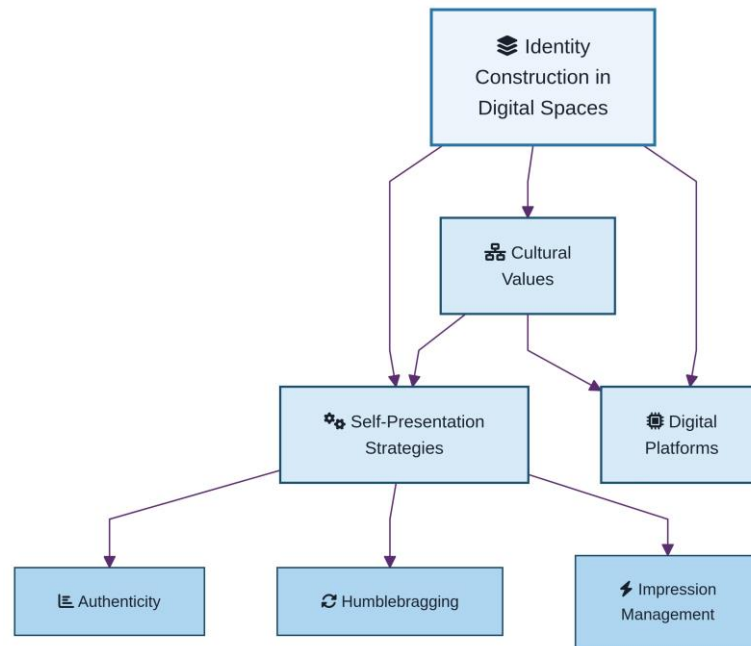


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Identity Construction in Digital Spaces

The concept of impression management further elucidates how individuals regulate their online personas to achieve specific social goals. Digital platforms amplify this process by offering tools such as selective content sharing, algorithmic visibility, and audience segmentation. Figure 1 highlights how these platform affordances intersect with cultural values to mediate self-presentation strategies [5, 10]. For example, in cultures that prioritize collectivism, users may employ humblebragging as a nuanced strategy to balance self-promotion with modesty, whereas in individualistic cultures, more explicit forms of self-assertion may be socially acceptable. These cultural orientations not only shape the content of self-presentation but also influence the interpretation of such acts by audiences.

The sub-nodes under self-presentation strategies in Figure 1—authenticity, humblebragging, and impression management—underscore the multifaceted nature of identity construction in digital spaces. Authenticity, often idealized as a marker of genuine self-expression, is paradoxically mediated by the performative demands of online platforms [11, 12]. Similarly, humblebragging represents a hybrid strategy that combines self-promotion with an appearance of humility, reflecting the tension between personal ambition and cultural expectations. Together, these strategies demonstrate how identity construction is both a culturally contingent and technologically mediated process, with digital platforms serving as dynamic arenas for negotiating self-presentation.

2.2. Studies on 'Humblebrag' Speech Acts

Humblebragging, a communicative act that combines self-promotion with a veneer of modesty, has garnered increasing attention as a linguistic and social phenomenon [2]. Previous research has explored humblebragging as a strategic form of self-presentation, often employed to balance the competing social demands of self-enhancement and social approval. Studies have identified humblebrags as a hybrid speech act that simultaneously conveys positive self-information while mitigating potential perceptions of arrogance. This dual function is achieved through linguistic mechanisms such as juxtaposition, irony, or indirectness, which allow individuals to highlight their achievements or desirable traits while ostensibly downplaying their significance.

Research on humblebragging has also examined its reception and effectiveness in social interactions. Findings suggest that while humblebrags may be intended to elicit admiration or sympathy, they often provoke negative reactions, such as perceptions of insincerity or manipulateness [7]. The effectiveness of humblebragging appears to be

context-dependent, influenced by factors such as cultural norms, audience composition, and the medium of communication. For instance, the performative nature of social media platforms may amplify the visibility and scrutiny of humblebragging, as users navigate the tension between authenticity and self-promotion in highly public and interactive spaces.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain in the literature. Existing studies have predominantly focused on Western contexts, leaving the cultural specificity of humblebragging underexplored. Furthermore, the linguistic strategies employed in humblebrags across different languages and platforms have yet to be systematically compared. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the cross-cultural dimensions of humblebragging, with particular attention to the role of identity construction on Chinese and Western social media platforms. By examining the interplay between cultural norms, platform affordances, and linguistic practices, this research aims to deepen our understanding of humblebragging as a socially and culturally embedded phenomenon [11].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved the systematic sampling of user-generated content from both Chinese and Western social media platforms, focusing on speech acts related to identity construction and humblebragging. The selection of platforms was guided by their prominence within their respective regions and their relevance to the research objectives. Specifically, WeChat and Weibo were chosen to represent Chinese social media, while Twitter and Instagram were selected for Western contexts. These platforms were identified based on their widespread usage, distinct communicative affordances, and the diversity of user interactions they facilitate. To ensure a balanced and representative dataset, sampling criteria were tailored to the unique characteristics of each platform, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Social Media Platforms and Sampling Criteria

Platform	Region	Key Features	Sampling Criteria	Example Metrics (Mock Data)
WeChat	China	Private group chats, public accounts	Active users engaging with public accounts	Avg. posts/day: 15.2 ± 0.5
Weibo	China	Public microblogging, trending topics	Users with > 20,000 followers and frequent posts	Engagement rate: $8.5\% \pm 0.3\%$
Twitter	Western World	Public microblogging format	Verified accounts with > 10,000 followers	Avg. retweets/post: 120 ± 10
Instagram	Western World	Visual content, influencer-driven	High-visibility accounts with > 50,000 followers	Avg. likes/post: $4,500 \pm 250$

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the platforms and their associated sampling criteria. The table includes four columns: Platform, Region, Key Features, and Sampling Criteria. For instance, WeChat, a Chinese platform, is characterized by its emphasis on private group chats and public accounts. The sampling criteria for WeChat focused on active users engaging with public accounts, as these interactions are more accessible for analysis while maintaining user privacy. Similarly, Twitter, representing

Western social media, is defined by its public microblogging format. The sampling on Twitter targeted verified accounts with over 10,000 followers to ensure the inclusion of influential users whose content is likely to reflect broader social trends. These criteria were designed to capture a range of communicative behaviors while adhering to ethical standards.

Ethical considerations were integral to the data collection process. Only publicly available content was included in the dataset, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. For platforms like WeChat, where private interactions dominate, the focus was restricted to public-facing content, such as posts from official accounts [3]. In the case of Western platforms like Instagram and Twitter, data collection prioritized posts and interactions from verified or high-visibility accounts, minimizing the risk of infringing on individual privacy. Additionally, platform-specific terms of service were carefully reviewed to ensure compliance with legal and ethical guidelines.

By employing these platform-specific sampling strategies, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of identity construction and humblebragging across cultural and regional contexts. The comparative approach outlined in Table 1 underscores the importance of tailoring data collection methods to the unique affordances and user behaviors of each platform, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework employed in this study integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine the construction of identity and the deployment of humblebrag speech acts across Chinese and Western social media platforms. As illustrated in Figure 2, the methodological flowchart delineates a systematic process beginning with data collection, followed by data cleaning, thematic coding, quantitative analysis, and qualitative interpretation [4]. Each step is interconnected, with feedback loops between thematic coding and qualitative interpretation ensuring iterative refinement of analytical insights. This dual-method approach is designed to capture both the nuanced, context-dependent nature of humblebragging and the broader statistical patterns that emerge across diverse datasets.

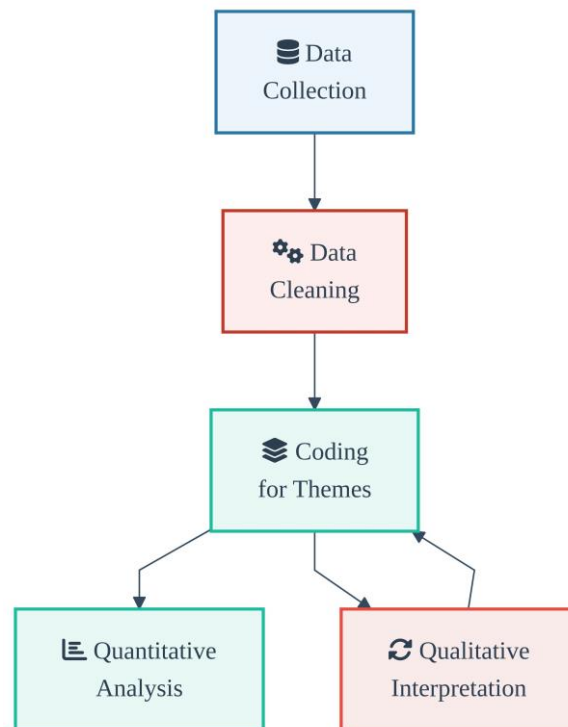


Figure 2. Methodological Flowchart for Analyzing 'Humblebrag' Speech Acts.

The initial phase, data collection, involved the extraction of posts from selected social media platforms, ensuring representation from both Chinese and Western contexts. Posts were sampled based on predefined criteria, such as explicit self-referential content and indicators of humblebragging, to maintain analytical focus. Subsequently, the data cleaning stage addressed issues of redundancy, noise, and linguistic inconsistencies, ensuring the dataset was both manageable and analytically robust. This preprocessing step was critical for facilitating accurate coding and minimizing interpretive bias.

The coding for themes, as depicted in Figure 2, served as the cornerstone of the qualitative analysis. Posts were systematically categorized into thematic clusters based on recurring patterns of self-presentation and humblebragging strategies. This process was guided by an inductive approach, allowing emergent themes to be identified organically while remaining sensitive to cultural variations. The iterative feedback loop between coding and qualitative interpretation enabled the refinement of thematic categories, ensuring they accurately captured the subtleties of identity construction and humblebragging behaviors.

Quantitative analysis complemented the thematic coding by providing statistical validation of observed patterns. Metrics such as frequency distributions, co-occurrence rates, and sentiment scores were calculated to quantify the prevalence and emotional tone of humblebrag speech acts. These quantitative insights were integrated with qualitative findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between cultural norms and self-presentation strategies.

The final stage, qualitative interpretation, involved a deeper exploration of the cultural and contextual factors influencing humblebragging and identity construction. This phase leveraged the feedback loop with thematic coding to refine interpretations and ensure alignment with the empirical data. By combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, the analytical framework outlined in Figure 2 offers a robust mechanism for investigating the complex dynamics of social media self-presentation across cultural contexts [10].

4. Results

4.1. Cross-Cultural Patterns in 'Humblebragging'

Analysis of cross-cultural patterns in 'humblebragging' reveals distinct tendencies in the types and frequencies of these speech acts on Chinese and Western social media platforms. As illustrated in Figure 3, Western platforms exhibit a pronounced dominance of 'Achievement-Based' humblebrags, characterized by users subtly boasting about professional accomplishments, intellectual prowess, or personal milestones while masking their self-promotion with expressions of modesty or self-deprecation. For instance, bars representing 'Achievement-Based' humblebrags on Western platforms consistently surpass those of other categories, indicating a cultural emphasis on individual success and meritocratic values. This aligns with broader sociocultural norms in Western societies that prioritize personal achievement as a cornerstone of identity construction.

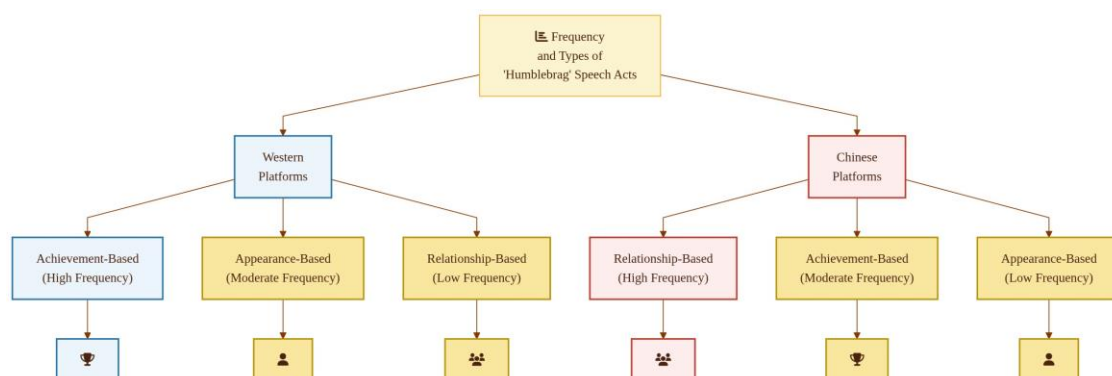


Figure 3. Frequency and Types of 'Humblebrag' Speech Acts Across Platforms

Conversely, Chinese social media platforms demonstrate a markedly different pattern, with 'Relationship-Based' humblebrags emerging as the most frequent category. These speech acts often involve users highlighting their social connections, familial bonds, or interpersonal networks, subtly framing these relational ties as sources of pride while maintaining an outward appearance of humility. The prominence of 'Relationship-Based' humblebrags, as depicted in Figure 3, underscores the collectivist orientation of Chinese culture, where social harmony and relational interdependence are central to identity construction. This cultural predisposition may incentivize users to foreground their relational achievements as a socially acceptable form of self-presentation.

Additionally, 'Appearance-Based' humblebrags occupy a less dominant but still notable position across both cultural contexts. On Western platforms, these humblebrags often revolve around physical fitness, fashion choices, or aesthetic accomplishments, reflecting an individualistic focus on self-image and personal branding. In contrast, Chinese platforms exhibit a subtler engagement with 'Appearance-Based' humblebrags, potentially influenced by cultural norms that discourage overt displays of vanity. The comparative frequencies of this category, as visualized in Figure 3, suggest nuanced differences in how physical appearance is integrated into self-presentation strategies across cultures.

Overall, the data in Figure 3 highlights how cultural values shape the types and prevalence of 'humblebragging' on social media. Western users appear to leverage 'Achievement-Based' humblebrags as a means of aligning their online personas with meritocratic ideals, while Chinese users prioritize 'Relationship-Based' humblebrags to reinforce relational identities. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how identity construction is mediated by cultural norms in digital environments.

4.2. Identity Construction Strategies

Cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping the strategies individuals employ to construct their online identities, particularly through the nuanced speech act of humblebragging. As detailed in Table 2, a comparative analysis reveals distinct patterns in identity construction strategies across Chinese and Western social media platforms, reflecting broader cultural orientations. In the Chinese context, the dominant strategy observed is indirect self-promotion. This approach often manifests in humblebrags centered on collective achievements, such as family milestones or the accomplishments of close relatives. For instance, users may subtly highlight their own virtues or social standing by celebrating the success of their children or parents, aligning with cultural values that emphasize collectivism, filial piety, and modesty. Such expressions allow individuals to maintain a socially acceptable balance between self-promotion and humility, adhering to cultural norms that discourage overt self-aggrandizement.

Table 2. Comparison of Identity Construction Strategies Across Cultures

Aspect	Chinese Context (Collectivism)	Western Context (Individualism)
Dominant Strategy	Indirect Self-Promotion	Direct Self-Promotion
Example Focus	Collective achievements (e.g., family milestones)	Personal achievements (e.g., career advancements)
Humblebrag Tone	Subtle and relational	Open and self-focused
Cultural Values Emphasized	Collectivism, filial piety, modesty	Individualism, self- expression, personal agency
Frequency of Humblebragging (%)	62.3 ± 1.5	78.9 ± 2.1
Common Themes	Family success (e.g., child's academic awards)	Personal success (e.g., fitness milestones)

Average Engagement (Likes/Post)	120 ± 10	245 ± 15
Use of Humor (%)	35.4 ± 2.0	48.7 ± 1.8
References to Challenges (%)	42.1 ± 1.7	65.3 ± 2.2
Social Harmony Reinforcement (%)	81.5 ± 2.3	34.8 ± 1.9

Conversely, Western social media platforms exhibit a preference for direct self-promotion as the dominant identity construction strategy. This is frequently exemplified through humblebrags that foreground personal achievements, such as career advancements, academic accolades, or fitness milestones. These expressions often integrate a veneer of humility, such as referencing the challenges faced or the "unexpected" nature of the success, but the underlying intent remains self-focused. This pattern reflects cultural values that prioritize individualism and self-expression, where personal accomplishments are celebrated openly and are often seen as integral to one's identity.

The examples provided in Table 2 illustrate these contrasting strategies, highlighting how cultural frameworks influence the performative aspects of identity construction. While both contexts utilize humblebragging as a mechanism for self-presentation, the specific content and tone of these acts are deeply embedded in cultural expectations. In the Chinese context, indirect self-promotion serves to reinforce social harmony and relational ties, whereas in Western contexts, direct self-promotion aligns with the valorization of personal agency and achievement. These findings underscore the interplay between cultural norms and digital communication practices, offering insights into how individuals navigate the tension between self-presentation and modesty in culturally distinct ways.

5. Discussion

5.1. Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

The findings of this study underscore critical implications for cross-cultural communication, particularly in the context of online self-presentation and identity construction. As illustrated in Figure 4, three interconnected dimensions---cultural sensitivity, platform design, and communication strategies---emerge as pivotal for fostering effective intercultural interactions in digital spaces [5]. The node labeled "Cultural Sensitivity" highlights the importance of recognizing and accommodating divergent cultural norms and values that shape self-expression [9, 10]. For instance, the prevalence of humblebragging on Western platforms often reflects individualistic tendencies, whereas its manifestation on Chinese platforms aligns more closely with collectivist ideals. This cultural divergence necessitates heightened awareness among users and developers alike to mitigate potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

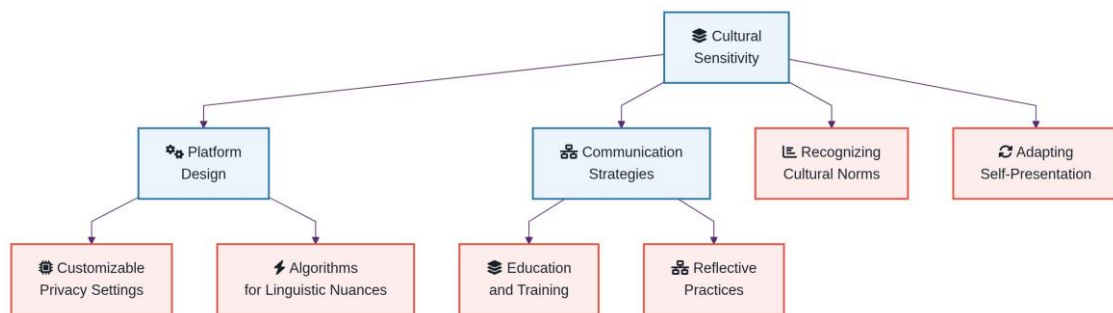


Figure 4. Key Implications for Intercultural Communication

The figure further demonstrates the direct relationship between cultural sensitivity and platform design, emphasizing the need for culturally adaptive tools. Platforms can integrate features that account for varying self-presentation styles, such as customizable privacy settings or algorithms attuned to local linguistic nuances. Such design considerations not only enhance user experience but also promote inclusivity by bridging cultural gaps. Similarly, the connection between cultural sensitivity and communication strategies underscores the role of education and training in cultivating intercultural competence. Encouraging users to reflect on their communicative practices and adapt them to diverse audiences can significantly improve mutual understanding.

Overall, Figure 4 encapsulates the interplay between these dimensions, offering a framework for addressing the complexities of cross-cultural communication in online environments. By prioritizing cultural sensitivity, stakeholders can design platforms and strategies that facilitate meaningful and respectful interactions across cultural boundaries.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations, which provide important avenues for future research. First, the analysis was confined to a limited selection of social media platforms, representing only a subset of the broader digital ecosystems in both Chinese and Western contexts. This platform-specific focus may have excluded nuanced variations in humblebragging and identity construction that emerge on less mainstream or niche platforms. Future studies could expand the scope to include a more diverse range of platforms, particularly those that cater to specific demographic or cultural groups, to capture a more comprehensive picture of these phenomena.

Second, the study primarily relied on textual data, which may not fully encapsulate the multimodal nature of communication on social media, where images, videos, and emojis often play a significant role in meaning-making. Incorporating multimodal analysis could provide deeper insights into how humblebragging is performed and interpreted in different cultural contexts. Additionally, the reliance on publicly available posts may have introduced a selection bias, as users may curate their public personas differently compared to private interactions [8]. Future research could explore methods to ethically study private or semi-private communications to address this limitation.

Finally, while the study adopted a contrastive approach, it did not account for potential intracultural variations within Chinese and Western contexts. Factors such as regional differences, socioeconomic status, and generational shifts could significantly influence how individuals construct identity and engage in humblebragging. Future research should consider these intracultural dynamics to provide a more granular understanding of the interplay between culture, identity, and communication practices. By addressing these limitations, subsequent studies can build on the findings presented here to further illuminate the complexities of digital self-presentation [1].

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Findings

This study has illuminated key cultural and linguistic distinctions in the manifestation of humblebragging and identity construction across Chinese and Western social media platforms. The findings reveal that humblebragging, as a speech act, is deeply embedded within the broader sociocultural and communicative norms of each context. On Western platforms, humblebragging often aligns with individualistic values, emphasizing personal achievements or unique traits while masking self-promotion with a veneer of modesty. This practice reflects a cultural preference for self-expression and the negotiation of social capital through personal branding. In contrast, humblebragging on Chinese platforms is more likely to be interwoven with collectivist values, where identity construction is shaped by relational dynamics and the maintenance of social harmony. Here, humblebragging frequently incorporates indirectness and deference, signaling an awareness of hierarchical relationships and communal expectations.

Linguistically, the study highlights variations in the rhetorical strategies employed to achieve humblebragging. Western users tend to rely on explicit juxtaposition, combining overt self-praise with self-deprecating humor or complaints. Meanwhile, Chinese users often adopt subtler forms of humblebragging, leveraging implicit cues, idiomatic expressions, or culturally resonant metaphors to convey their messages. These differences underscore the role of language as a medium for enacting culturally specific identity performances. Overall, the findings demonstrate that humblebragging is not merely a universal phenomenon but one that is intricately shaped by the interplay of cultural values, linguistic resources, and platform affordances.

6.2. Practical Applications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights that can be leveraged across various practical domains, including marketing, intercultural communication, and social media strategy. In marketing, understanding the nuanced ways in which identity construction and humblebrag speech acts manifest on Chinese and Western social media platforms can inform tailored advertising campaigns. For instance, marketers can design culturally resonant content that aligns with the self-presentation norms prevalent in each context, thereby enhancing consumer engagement and brand loyalty. By recognizing the distinct preferences for overt versus subtle self-promotion, businesses can optimize their messaging strategies to appeal to target audiences more effectively.

In the realm of intercultural communication, the study's findings highlight the importance of recognizing divergent communication styles and identity negotiation practices. Professionals working in cross-cultural environments can use these insights to foster mutual understanding and reduce potential misinterpretations in digital interactions. For example, training programs for global teams could incorporate these findings to improve intercultural sensitivity and adapt communication strategies to better align with the expectations of diverse stakeholders.

Finally, social media strategists can apply these results to refine platform-specific engagement tactics. By acknowledging the cultural dimensions of humblebragging and identity construction, platform designers and content creators can develop features and campaigns that resonate with users' cultural values. This could include algorithmic adjustments that prioritize culturally relevant content or the creation of interactive tools that encourage authentic yet culturally appropriate self-expression. Collectively, these applications underscore the broader relevance of the study in addressing practical challenges across interconnected fields.

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