A Linguistic Analysis of Snapchat's Founding Narrative

Leili Qu

Pass College of Chongqing Technology&Business University,Chongqing,401520,China

Abstract: Fast-evolving technologies surely accelerate the pace of social networking sites' absorption into every facet of our lives. SNS, by definition, enable users to create their own online personas, equipped with photographs and photos that they may use to connect with other users. SNS have thus become ever more pivotal in promoting social communication and developing interpersonal relationships. Snapchat is a social networking platform founded in 2011 and it has become a craze upon its inception. Given that little study has been conducted to investigate the relationship between Snapchat's identity construction and its prevalence, in this paper, the founding story posted on Snapchat's website is marshalled as data source and further analysed through narrative approach and metaphor analysis with a view to uncovering the identity Snapchat seeks to create and how it is communicated to the public through the carefully crafted founding story. It is hoped that this paper can offer some insights into how corporations employ language to present the desired identities toward the public.

Keywords: Snapchat; Founding story; Narrative approach; Metaphor analysis; MIP

1. Introduction

The launch of SixDegrees.com arguably marked the beginning of the Social networking sites (SNS) trend (Boyd & Ellison, 2008) and fast-developing technologies undoubtedly boost the pace of their integration into every aspect of our life. By definition, SNS allow users to construct their own profiles, images and photos in cyberspace, enabling them to build links with other users. As such, SNS have played increasingly crucial roles in facilitating social communication and establishing interpersonal relationships. In this paper, I will conduct a case study of Snapchat (one of the most popular SNS), aiming at revealing the identity Snapchat intends to construct and how it is communicated to the public through carefully designed founding story.

Snapchat is a social media company founded in 2011. It developed the photo-sharing messaging mobile application Snapchat upon its inception. The most striking feature of Snapchat is its time-limited self-destructing capability for shared content. Messages and pictures are only available for ten-second maximum time before becoming inaccessible. Given that little research has been conducted to explore the link between the identity construction of Snapchat and its popularity, in this paper, I will conduct a linguistic analysis to reveal the identity Snapchat intends to construct in order to "sell" its product. I choose the founding story posted on Snapchat's website as my data source. This text recounts the founding history of Snapchat from the perspective of Evan Spiegel (the founder), recapitulating their joint efforts to start up business and what Snapchat essentially is. I will analyze this founding story from the narrative approach and metaphor analysis, through which I can gain insights into this company's self-positioning toward the public.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1 Introduction to corporate identity and founding narrative

According to Margulies (1977), corporate identity represents how a company posits itself to external publics, which is the ideal self-orientation of the company as a whole. A positive corporate identity adds more value to services and products, promoting customer loyalty, stimulating investments and attracting professional talents (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Following this, the matter lies in how to construct the intended identity. According to Seaman & Smith (2012), in most cases, a founding narrative is the reconstruction of a company's history as history itself is part of what endows a group with an identity. For Snapchat, therefore, a pre-prepared narrative

of its founding history helps to construct a positive identity it intends to impress the general public, which would eventually promote its application usage.

2.2 Review of the narrative approach

A key concept in traditional definition of a narrative is "temporal juncture", indicating that an efficient way of recounting the past is matching the order of narrative clauses with the original order in which those events happened. Focusing on "temporal juncture", Labov developed a prototypical model for narrative analysis, in which abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda constitute essential elements of spontaneous storytelling (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This model suggests that the structure of a clause is in line with its function in the overall narrative. That is, examining the structure as a whole will shed light on how events are transferred from the perspective of the narrator and made persuasive to the audience.

2.3 Review of the metaphor analysis

Narrowly construed, metaphor is the representation of one thing in terms of another. Broadly construed, "it includes all non-literal representations, which is a persuasive linguistic phenomenon and central to many different types of communication" (Semino, 2008: 1). This paper mainly focuses on analyzing how metaphorical languages are utilized to construct and communicate positive corporate identity. Corresponding to this is the persuasive role of metaphor in advertising communication.

3. Data analysis

3.1 A brief description of data in view of professional communication

As suggested by Schnurr (2013:17), "professional communication is an umbrella term for communicative encounters that take place in a workplace context in the widest sense". In the case of Snapchat, the founding story is virtually one-way written communication between the company and the public. According to Schnurr et al (1997), talk between an expert representing some authority and a layman can be categorized as institutional talk, therefore it is justifiable to consider this founding narrative as institutional discourse. In addition, Drew and Heritage (1992) holds that institutional talk is featured in role constraints on participants and power imbalance. Given this founding narrative, the narrator representing the company leads the "talking", whereas the public are only receivers without speaking rights to interact with the narrator.

3.2 Analyzing the founding story from narrative approach

Based on Labov's narrative model, I have extracted some lines from the text to be analyzed as follows.

Extract:

Let's chat

1. My co-founder Bobby and I met at Stanford in 2009.

2. I was a freshman studying Product Design

3. and Bobby was a junior working on his B.S. in Mathematical and Computational Science.

4. Our first project was Future Freshman – a site that would forever improve the way high school students applied to college.

5. Or so we thought.

6. The site failed to get traction

7. but we learned something important — we loved working together.

Line1-4 can be identified as the orientation. Line1 introduces characters (Bobby and ("I"-Evan Spiegel), the time (2009) and the place (Stanford). Line2-3 provide more information about characters: their social identities as students in Stanford. Line 4 refers to the situation and behaviors involved, namely, their first trial to develop a site which was intended for facilitating students' transformation from high school life to college life. As implied by Özyıldırım (2009), evaluation can be narrators' comments on what they have experienced from the outside. Line 5 "or so we thought" constitutes the evaluative element, by which the narrator externally comments on their initial expectation for their first project. Following the evaluation is finally what happened- "the site failed to get traction" (line 6), which is the result of their first trial for starting a business. "get traction" here is metaphorically used, denoting "draw attention" and "gain popularity" in the context. By narrating the failure of their first project in such a relaxing and humorous way, the narrator avoids the negative feeling and serious atmosphere that might be brought about by formal linguistic choices. Line 7 is the evaluation. As stated above, evaluation helps to reveal the emotional side of narrators and indicates point of the story. The narrator's recapitulation of their experience in developing a site at the very beginning conveys why there is a need to illustrate their initial trial. That is, despite that the project failed eventually, they found they co-operated well during the whole process and they appreciated working together,

hinting their following efforts to co-found Snapchat. The linguistic choice of "love" is an overt emotional expression. From line 7, we can see that the narrator intends to establish Snapchat as a "cohesive" and "lovingly-built" company. Also, referring to themselves as students who tried to start from scratch creates a sense of proximity and conveys the "easily-accessible" identity characteristic to readers.

Overall, referring to on Labov's narrative model, the linguistic analysis above provides an efficient way to interpret the narrator's perspective on their founding experience. The identity of Snapchat is justifiably elicited in this founding story.

3.3 Examining metaphor's role in identity construction

Corporate identity is an abstract entity, whereas by utilizing these metaphorically-used languages, it can be made concrete and vividly communicated to readers (Koller, 2009). Metaphorical language in this narrative enables readers to positively perceive the corporate identity the narrator intends to convey. Following this, the main function of metaphor in this founding narrative is not specifically concerned with conceptualizing one thing in terms of another. It primarily functions to convey the narrator's attitudes and emotions toward Snapchat and thus elicits the corporate identity Snapchat intend to build.

Metaphorically-used lexical units in this narrative are expressive, vivid and to a large extent informal. However, it is the informal metaphorical expressions that present snapchat as "easy", "dynamic" and "vibrant". As these metaphorical expressions have been commonly used in daily communication, readers could be easily engaged in this story and such kind of humorous narrating way helps to establish a common ground and create a relaxing atmosphere. Therefore, unlike a careful press briefing bearing a sense of alienation, this narrative creates a sense of proximity toward readers. As a result, it builds an "easy" identity of Snapchat. In addition, as the founding narrative is voiced from the perspective of Evan who is the representative of Snapchat, his use of metaphorical language following the trend in narration naturally endows Snapchat with "vibrant" and "dynamic" attributes. In this founding narrative, the narrator mainly portrays the features of their photo-sharing application as in "we wanted a place to share awkard selfies…". Such external metaphorical evaluation reveals the narrator's attitudes and emotions toward this application and these features communicated virtually represent the identities of Snapchat. That is, overall, the portrayal of product features to readers eventually represents the identity attributes of Snapchat. In this context, Snapchat is established as a "fun" and "honest" company.

Plus, as Ottati and Renstrom (2010) state that metaphorical language could shape recipients' perception of communication topic, positive evaluative judgements on communication topic contained in metaphors will thereby help to form corresponding impression in the minds of recipients. In the founding narrative, as the object being mainly described, Snapchat is the communication topic. Based on the metaphor analysis above, it can be seen that Snapchat is portrayed as being "easy", "dynamic", "credible", "fun" and "honest". As such, readers thereby would consider Snapchat as an "easy", "dynamic", "credible", "fun" and "honest" company.

4. Findings and discussions

According to Marra and Angouri (2011), Language serves as an efficient tool to help construct various identities, by virtue of which, we are endowed with the flexibility to enact who we are either at individual or organization level. In the case of Snapchat, the founding narrative in this paper efficiently represents its intended corporate identities toward the public. For one thing, the founding narrative is of importance for Snapchat to present who they are as a newly founded company. For another, positive identities need to be communicated for self-promotion and thus attracting more users. Following this, the matter lies in how languages are employed to build the intended identities in the minds of the audience. Given my research objective, the analysis above has made it clear narrative structures and metaphorical language are fully represented in this text, by virtue of which, multiple identity characteristics including "easy", "lovingly-built". "credible" and "honest" have been attributed to Snapchat.

Following Labov's narrative model, the structure analysis of the text reveals Snapchat's founding history and the intended identity from the perspective of the narrator. According to separate function performed by each element, orientation, complicating actions, resolution and coda mainly inform readers of the founding process, whereas evaluation primarily functions to convey the corporate identity. The narrator's evaluative commentary to what they have experienced in the founding process and their emotions and attitudes toward Snapchat indicate the corporate identity they intend to construct. In particular, those linguistic choices entailed in this evaluation part greatly contribute to Snapchat's identity construction.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, through the application of Labov's narrative model and MIP, this paper has investigated into how Snapchat employs language to present the desired identities toward the public. From the perspective of Evan, the founding process is conveyed through structures of orientation, complicating actions, resolution and coda under Labov's narrative model, whereas the identity Snapchat intends to construct and communicate is primarily embodied in evaluative structures and metaphorically used words. By taking an in-depth look at the founding narrative, linguistic analysis above suggests a variety of identity characteristics have been ascribed to Snapchat, as the result of which, it is built as an "easily-accessible", "cohesive", "lovingly-built", "fun", "credible", "vibrant" and "honest" company.

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About the author:

Leili Qu (1994-12-3), female, Han Nationality, native place: Fuling, Chongqing, Education: postgraduate, research direction: English teaching, linguistics.