



A Pragmatic Study of Self-Depreciation in Social Media Context

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Abstract

Recent years have seen renewed interest in pragmatic research within the realm of social media platforms. This article collected self-depreciation discourse as the linguistic data on the platform of “Xiaohongshu” to investigate the themes, strategies and causes by the use of the thematic and discourse analysis method. The findings of this study reveal that the themes of self-depreciation discourse prominently focus on competence and achievement. The pragmatic strategies can be divided into three types, namely, explicit, modified, and implicit self-denigration. The phenomenon of self-depreciation is influenced by traditional perception, social environment, and the context of the internet. This paper aims to make a valuable contribution to the research in the field of internet pragmatics.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Social Media, “Xiaohongshu”, Self-Depreciation, Pragmatic Research

1. Introduction

The evolution of internet communication has brought about significant changes in interactive modes, which promotes growing interests among researchers in the realm of social media platforms (Dayter, 2014 [1]; Ren & Guo, 2020 [2]; Ren & Guo, 2022 [3]; Chen, 2022 [4]). The phenomenon of self-depreciation in internet discourse has garnered the interest of linguistic researchers. Gu (1990) [5] identifies two key components in self-depreciation, specifically, the act of belittling oneself while simultaneously elevating one’s speech partner. Kim (2014) [6] argued that self-depreciation is a means for speakers to demonstrate their own

inferiority or humility to the listener, but without mentioning the elevation of others. On a related but distinct definition, self-mockery entails the use of negative self-evaluation as a means of generating amusement or humor. Following Walkinshaw (2019) [7], the self-deprecation examined in this study is different from self-modesty, which encompasses self-depreciation speech acts that are driven by depression-oriented self-deprecation and humor-oriented self-mockery. With the advent of online communication, self-depreciation speech acts have gradually extended from traditional contexts to digital contexts. The self-depreciation on social media platforms have also received increasing attention from scholars (Ruth, 2019 [8]; Dendenne, 2021 [9]). The emergence of the internet context has significantly expanded the connotative meaning of self-depreciation discourse. The extant studies on self-denigration primarily focused on its pragmatic functions and self-denigration distribution in corpus (Speer, 2019 [10]; Kádár & Zhou, 2020 [11]; Mai *et al.*, 2021 [12]). Ruth (2019) [8] conducted an analysis of multi-modal “ugly selfies” on the Instagram social platform, contributing to research beyond single modality. Dendenne (2021) [9] took an online cross-cultural interaction platform as research data, conducting a comparative study on three topics: compliments, self-praise, and self-depreciation, thereby breaking the narrow focus on a single topic. It is worth noting that language expressions and pragmatic strategies may differ across diverse social media platforms (Ren, 2018) [13]. Hence, it is necessary to conduct a research in other platforms. Xiaohongshu (<https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore>) is a highly active social media platform in China, yet pragmatic research based on Xiaohongshu remains limited. To address this gap, the present study takes self-depreciation discourse from Xiaohongshu as research data, aiming to provide empirical findings and valuable insights into the field of internet pragmatics. To delve into the phenomenon of self-denigration on the Xiaohongshu social media platform, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the prominent keywords and prevailing topic distributions within self-depreciation discourse on the Xiaohongshu social media platform?
- 2) What specific strategies are employed to convey self-depreciation sentiments, and how can these strategies be classified?
- 3) What factors contribute to the prevalence of self-depreciation discourse on Xiaohongshu platforms?

2. Self-Denigration, Politeness and Face

Leech (1983) [14] proposed the influential politeness principle, including maxims of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy. Approbation contains minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Modesty maxim includes minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. In light of this, He (1999) [15] proposed the consolidation of the six maxims of politeness principles into a single maxim: to minimize personal gains and maximize the benefits for others, while maximizing personal losses and minimizing

harm to others. Consequently, adopting a moderate approach to self-deprecation can prove advantageous in cultivating a humble and favorable perception among others, aligning with the principles of politeness.

The concept of “face” plays a crucial role in the study of politeness within the domain of pragmatics. Brown and Levinson (1987) [16] introduced the “Face-saving Theory” (FST), which addresses the fundamental needs of rational individuals. Face can be divided into two aspects: negative face and positive face. Positive face refers to the aspiration to get others’ favor and support, whereas negative face involves the desire for freedom of action and behavior without interference. Brown and Levinson proposed that certain speech acts, known as face-threatening acts (FTAs), have the potential to challenge individuals’ face. FTA arises in four distinct situations. Firstly, threatening the positive face of a listener involves the speaker’s disregard for the listener’s emotions and needs, displaying a lack of concern for their feelings. Secondly, threatening the negative face of the hearers occurs when the speaker interferes with their freedom of action. Thirdly, threatening the negative face of speakers encompasses actions such as apologizing, accepting praise, self-contradicting, confessing, or admitting guilt or mistakes. Lastly, threatening the negative face of speakers involves expressing gratitude, accepting the gratitude and apologies of hearers, accepting offers, unwilling promises, and offers.

In conclusion, self-depreciation speech act conforms to the politeness principles proposed by Gu (1990) and Leech (1983). However, self-depreciation speech acts that involve direct negative self-evaluation which threaten the negative face of speakers.

3. Methodology

Xiaohongshu, often referred to as “A community for young people to share their life,” is a rapidly expanding social media platform primarily attracting a young user base, with over 70% of users being born after the 1990s. Official data indicates that Xiaohongshu has amassed a monthly active user more than 200 million in 2023. Obviously, this platform has wide influence in the people’s online communication. Considering the widespread popularity of this platform and the inadequate pragmatic research conducted in Xiaohongshu. This study selected it as the source for data collection to explore the characteristics of self-denigration discourse. This study utilizes thematic analysis method to sort self-depreciation discourse into different categories and use discourse analysis method to analyze the precise content of the research data. The data collection stage spans from May 2022 to February 2023, during which 200 research corpus materials were collected and organized. In order to isolate the impact of multimodal emoticons on discourse meaning, this study exclusively considered corpus materials consisting of textual words, while excluding emoticons, numbers, letters, and any combinations of them. The corpus analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative analysis software, with the three authors independently performing the process. The corpus underwent two rounds of annotation, with a two-month in-

terval between each annotation. Following several revisions of the classification outcomes, any discrepancies in the annotation results were thoroughly examined through discussions among the three researchers to reach a consensus. During the corpus coding and analysis, it was observed that certain data comprised more than one pragmatic strategy. Through analysis, it was determined that the 200 self-depreciation corpus samples collected in this study encompassed a total of 218 instances of pragmatic strategies.

4. Results

4.1. Key Words Distribution of Self-Denigration Discourse

The word cloud is a widely used text visualization technique that extracts keywords from text and visually presents them in a 2D space. It is commonly employed to showcase content, assist in text analysis, and captivate readers (Bao & Wang, 2021) [17]. Given the diverse and uncertain identities of internet users, self-depreciation discourse is manifested through various key words. To contribute cognition about the key words of self-denigration, this study eliminated unrelated words and employed the qualitative software NVivo to analyze the word cloud.

For a better understanding of the main keywords, the top 20 of the word frequency rankings are presented in the word cloud. The visualized outcome is presented in **Figure 1**, showcasing the frequency distribution of self-depreciation discourse. In **Figure 1**, words that appear more frequently are depicted as larger and closer to the central position, while words with lower frequencies are represented as smaller and farther away from the central position. As illustrated, the word cloud prominently displays terms such as others, self-abasement, terrible, hate, and failure. Through the utilization of the word cloud, we can gain insights into the primary content of self-denigration discourse. These findings highlight many aspects of self-depreciation, encompassing aspects such as comparisons with others and acknowledging personal failures in both work and life.



Figure 1. Word cloud of self-denigration discourse in Xiaohongshu platform.

4.2. The Major Topics Distribution of Self-Denigration

The digital communication has greatly influenced the language use among individuals. Different speakers, characterized by variations in age and gender, utilize diverse types of self-depreciation discourse (Hu, 2009) [18]. The topics identified using Nvivo software are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 illustrates the principal themes of self-depreciation, including personality, achievement, competence, behavior, as well as the synthesis of self-depreciation and unknown self-depreciation. Of these, competence constitutes the largest proportion, accounting for 45% of the total. An example of competence self-depreciation is seen in the statement “Why I can’t do anything well.” The self-denigration in competence particularly concerns the learning, work, and social abilities. Achievement self-depreciation ranks second, comprising 36% of the total. An example of such self-depreciation is illustrated in the sentence “I suddenly found that my friends and classmates around me were all successful in their studies, they are young and promising, none of them disappointed me, except for myself.” Synthetical self-depreciation occurs when individuals denigrate themselves in two or more aspects simultaneously, and it accounts for 27%. For instance, a speaker expresses, “I feel that my whole person is valueless; my original family is not good; my appearance is ordinary; my grades are very poor, and I don’t want to make an effort.” In this example, the speaker displays a negative evaluation of himself regarding appearance, behavior, and achievement in the statement. Self-depreciation of personality and unknown topics both represent 26%. An example of personality self-depreciation is reflected in the statement “I extraordinarily hate my preference for tentative personality and the tendency to prevent loss in time.” Unknown self-depreciation pertains to instances where speakers employ self-depreciation, but the specific topic being addressed is challenging to discern. For example, the statement “I’m such a loser.” lacks sufficient context to determine the topic, therefore it is categorized as unknown self-depreciation. Emotion and appearance comprise the lowest percentages, accounting for 11% and 7%, respectively, suggesting that speakers allocate less attention to these aspects.

4.3. The Strategies Distribution of Self-Denigration

Self-depreciation can serve as an invitation for others to gain insight into the speaker’s private life (Dendenne, 2021) [9]. Notably, through self-depreciation discourse, listeners have the opportunity to discern the speaker’s emotional

Table 1. Topics distribution of self-denigration discourse.

Topics	Personality	Achievement	Competence	Appearance	Total
Number	26	36	45	7	
Topics	Emotion	Behaviour	Synthesis	Unknown	200
Number	11	22	27	26	

distress or stress in recent life experiences. The data revealed that speakers primarily employ three types of self-depreciation strategies: explicit, modified, and implicit self-depreciation. **Table 2** presents the classified findings obtained through analysis. On the Xiaohongshu social media platform, explicit self-depreciation strategies are the most prevalent, followed by modified self-depreciation strategies. The lowest proportion is observed in the implicit self-depreciation strategies. The frequency distribution shows that three types of self-denigration account for 49.54%, 45.87%, and 4.59% respectively.

4.3.1. Explicit Self-Denigration

Explicit self-depreciation refers to speech acts where speakers directly threaten their own face. These strategies have a significant pragmatic impact and often involve the use of negative vocabularies or interrogative sentences with affirmative self-depreciation meaning.

1) Direct Expression

Digital technology has a substantial impact on the way we read, think, communicate, work, live, create and participate in private and public affairs (Ren, Guo, 2020) [2]. The Xiaohongshu social media platform, as a digital technology product, presents typical features commonly found in online social media platforms, including anonymity and virtuality. In our analysis, we will identify explicit self-depreciation by focusing on self-evaluation discourses that incorporate negative words, as exemplified below.

Example 1: 我好崩溃，自己好蠢，什么都不会
I am so devastated, I am so stupid, I can do nothing.

Table 2. The strategies of self-depreciation in Xiaohongshu.

Nodes	Sub-nodes	Number	Percentage (%)
Explicit Self-depreciation		108	49.54
	Direct Expression	86	39.45
	Interrogative Expression	22	10.09
Modified Self-depreciation		100	45.87
	Hedges	63	28.90
	Internet Buzzwords	5	2.29
	Comparison	22	10.09
	Rhetorical Device	10	4.59
Implicit Self-depreciation		10	4.59
	Third-party evaluation	3	1.38
	Complaint	7	3.21
Total		218	100

In Example 1, the speaker uses the key word “stupid” to evaluate themselves, thereby constructing a negative self-image. This can be classified as a direct expression strategy within the discourse of self-depreciation.

2) Interrogative Expression

By posing questions that involve self-depreciation, the speakers intend to foster a sense of diminished self-esteem. These strategies play a role in the formation of self-depreciation discourse, as the speakers seek guidance from online listeners. This is illustrated in the following example.

Example 2: 怎样跟一事无成的自己和解?

How can I reconcile myself with the fact that I have achieved nothing?

In Example 2, although the speaker is asking a question and seeking help, “nothing has been achieved” reflects the speaker’s self-depreciation in his own achievements. The speakers convey negative self-evaluation in a questioning tone.

4.3.2. Modified Self-Denigration

The modified self-depreciation strategy contains various subordinate strategies. Albeit the strong self-denigration can also be embodied by applying the modified strategies in the process of self-denigration, which mitigate the degree of self-denigration and preserves the speaker’s discursive space.

1) Hedges

The use of hedges is one of the important reasons for the emergence of pragmatic ambiguity. Hedges include two types, “approximator” and “shields”. The later can be further divided into plausibility Shields and attribution shields (He & Chen, 2002) [19]. The analysis results show that the main type of hedges used in present study is plausibility shields.

Example 3: 身边的朋友都上岸了好像只有我前途渺茫

All my friends around me have achieved something but I seem to be the only one with no future.

The underlined word “seem” in Example 3 is a plausibility shields. The speaker makes a low self-negative assessment of his own achievements. The use of hedges moderates the tone, lessens the intensity of the discourse and reduces the negative effect of self-depreciation, which is the pragmatic function of hedges in self-depreciation context.

2) Internet Buzzwords

Buzzwords refer to the phrase that is widely used, circulated and known by people in a certain period of time, in a certain region or in a certain social group, which often refer to some words (Ran, 2006) [20]. With the development of time and society, some Internet buzzwords with the times characters often emerge. Internet buzzwords can often be found in people’s self-depreciation speech acts, as demonstrated in Example 4.

Example 4: 马上就要到研究生院校了，本摆烂人瑟瑟发抖

It’s almost time for postgraduate school, and I, who let it rot, am trembling.

The Internet buzzword “let it rot” refers to the perception that individuals are

in a state of decadence due to their lack of effort. As exemplified in Example 4, the speaker, who is going to be a graduate student, employs the Internet buzzword “let it rot” as a discourse strategy to indirectly express self-deprecation regarding their tendency to slack off in his or her learning process.

3) Comparison

The present study identifies three manifestations of the comparison strategy. Firstly, speakers engage in self-deprecation by contrasting themselves with a third party, conveying a sense of anxiety and inferiority to highlight their perceived lack of skill compared to others. Secondly, they express dissatisfaction with their current self by contrasting it with an idealized version of themselves. Lastly, they compare their past self with their present self to express disappointment with their current status quo or performance.

Example 5: 他们真的好有天赋，相比之下我什么都不是，努力换来也的比他们随手一试的糟糕很多

They are really so talented but I am nobody, and my efforts are much worse than their casual attempts.

Example 6: 焦虑的大学生活，想变瘦变好看，想好好学习

I'm anxious about my university life, I want to be thin and have beautiful appearance, and I want to study hard.

Example 7: 越长大越羡慕别人，以前遇到再好的别人也不会这样 可能因为自己在走下坡路，自己活得不好

The more I grow up, the more I will envy others. However, I don't have this feeling in the past though the others are much better than me, maybe because I am going downhill. I'm not living a good life.

In Example 5, the speaker uses self-deprecation discourse through the comparison strategies to express a perceived lack of talent and achievements in comparison to others. Example 6 illustrates the contrast between the author's aspirations for their ideal self and the current dissatisfied reality. It can be seen that Example 6 highlights the speaker's perception of his university life is anxious, appearance is common, and the learning state is terrible. Example 7 reflects the speaker's comparison between his present self with his past performance. In addition, the speaker analyzed the reasons and concluded that he is living a worse life. Therefore, the speaker's self-deprecation intentions are embodied.

4) Rhetorical Device

To achieve the interactive intention, the speaker use the rhetorical device to soften the tone. The use of rhetorical device aims to enable the hearer to have a deeper understand for his utterance or achieve a humorous pragmatic effect. In this study, the main rhetorical device is analogy.

Example 8: 我是一颗卷心菜，有卷死别人的心，但我菜

I am a cabbage and have the determination to exceed others, but I am incompetent.

In Example 8, the speaker compare himself to cabbage, the centre of the cabbage is regarded as a heart yearning to succeed, the cabbage as a kind of vegeta-

ble are compared to the low competence. By the use of the analogy strategy, the fact that the speaker have the will but not the strength can be revealed.

4.3.3. Implicit Self-Depreciation

The present study examines implicit strategies, which involve indirect speech acts where listeners infer the speaker's true intentions based on the words they use. Online social media platforms, with their virtual nature, offer individuals the convenience to express their ideas directly. Analysis of the corpus reveals that implicit self-deprecation strategies constitute the smallest proportion in general.

1) Third-party evaluation

Citing third-party evaluation means to reduce the intensity of self-deprecation by paraphrasing the content of others' comments about himself, which indirectly expresses the intention of self-deprecation. By quoting third-party evaluation can achieve the discursive effect of self-deprecation or self-mockery.

Example 9: 国企的我，工作了三年，却没有得到领导的认可，我很失败

I have been working in a state-owned enterprise for three years, but I have not received any recognition from the leaders, I am a failure.

In Example 9, the speaker, an employee of a state-owned enterprise, expresses his feelings of frustration and disappointment in his work by invoking the leader's attitude and evaluation. This discourse strategy effectively achieves the intention of self-deprecation, as the speaker proceeds to engage in self-depreciation after showcasing the leaders' attitude.

2) Complaint

In complaint strategy, the self-deprecation discourse is embedded in the complained topic. The speaker elicits the self-deprecation topic by complaining the corresponding event. Through textual analysis, the listener is able to identify the real purpose, rather than solely consider as a complaint.

Example 10: 我最近心好烦，学校可能要提拔人了，但是领导永远看不到我，我感觉我就没有被重视的命，不论多么的努力

I am so upset lately, the school may be promoting people, but the leaders never notice me. I feel like I'm ignored, no matter how hard I work.

As in Example 10, the speaker expresses his negative mood about his work and personal fate via complaint. The words "no matter how hard I try" and "the leader never notices me", subsequently, the speaker made a negative evaluation for his fate, the speaker's self-deprecation intention can be conveyed in the process of complaint.

5. The Reasons of the Emergency of Self-Denigration on Internet

5.1. Socio-Cultural Factors of Self-Depreciation

Self-deprecation serves as a fundamental form of polite communication and a tool for social class differentiation (Pan & Kádár, 2011) [21]. Traditional socio-cultural factors have played a significant role in shaping and evolving self-de-

precation behavior. Firstly, within a hierarchical class society, subordinates sought to reassure their superiors in order to maintain a secure livelihood. Consequently, individuals were inclined to devalue or negate their own self-worth, employing self-deprecation as a means of communication. This objective environment gave rise to Chinese euphemisms and self-deprecation language (Wang *et al.*, 2019) [22]. Languages describe distinct temporal characteristics, and on-line discourse takes on different forms in different eras (Lei, 2022) [23]. In the contemporary digital communication era, self-deprecation speech acts display diverse characteristics that transcend social class. One prominent manifestation of self-deprecation discourse in society is its use as a response to compliments in face-to-face communication. However, in the silent textual expression of comments on social media platforms, the socio-cultural context in which self-deprecation language arises stems from the anxiety-inducing nature of the social environment. Individuals often gauge their success or failure based on material possessions and achievements. In this competitive environment, individuals opt to utilize self-deprecation as a means of articulating their sense of powerlessness when confronted with the challenges of real life.

5.2. Social Media Factors of Self-Depreciation

The characteristics of social media platforms facilitate the presentation and comprehension of self-deprecation discourse. Firstly, the virtual and concealed nature of the online environment provides a convenient condition for expressing self-deprecation. Within the online community, speakers can freely express their genuine thoughts without fear of losing face, which is a significant reason why self-deprecation language can generate negative discourse in social media, despite it is unpopular in daily life. Secondly, hashtags play a crucial role. The function of hashtags not only services the convenience of search. It can be seen as a form of metadata, which indicates the textual characteristics (Zappavigna, 2015) [24]. The main functions of hashtags contain interpretative evaluation and contextual subordination. The corpus for this study was collected from the hashtags #树洞 (#TreeHollow) and #我的日常 (#MyDailyLife), which shape an environment where people confide their worries and sorrows. Thus, speakers and readers implicitly establish a shared context under the hashtag, which facilitates the production and comprehension of self-deprecation discourse within that context. Furthermore, memes are cultural units that imitate and replicate communicative patterns from person to person (Piata, 2016) [25]. The self-deprecation corpus in this study includes Internet buzzwords such as “let it rot” and “love-struck”. These buzzwords have become internet memes that are constantly replicated, making it easy for people to grasp the meaning of self-deprecation. The negative connotations associated with these buzzwords have deeply ingrained in people’s minds.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines self-denigration on the Xiaohongshu social media platform,

focusing on three aspects: topic distribution, discourse strategies, and causes for the emergency. The findings reveal that self-deprecation topics primarily encompass eight themes, and the use of strategies can be categorized into three main groups and eight sub-strategies. Self-deprecation discourse emerges within a specific socio-cultural context and a distinctive social media environment. Self-deprecation is a common linguistic phenomenon in both offline and online settings. When the self-denigration is used for humor, self-deprecation can have a positive discursive impact, but negative self-deprecation not only hinders proper self-evaluation but also has detrimental effects on one's physical and mental well-being. By analyzing and exploring self-deprecation discourse on Xiaohongshu social media platform, this study aims to offer insights into the implementation and comprehension of self-deprecation discourse and the use of self-deprecation strategies. Additionally, this study has certain limitations, such as the limited corpus and specific platform. I would like to conclude by suggesting that future research should explore larger corpora, as they may yield different results.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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