



FOREGROUNDING IDENTITY THROUGH INFORMATION VALUE IN ONLINE SELF-PRESENTATION: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study investigates how information value operates as a semiotic resource for foregrounding identity in online self-presentation. While prior research on digital identity has largely emphasized textual and psychological dimensions, limited attention has been given to the role of compositional organization in structuring identity. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics, the study adopts a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis design. The population comprises social media users, with four purposively selected profiles from Instagram, Facebook, and personal blogs serving as the sample. Data were analyzed through multimodal examination of visual and verbal elements, with emphasis on spatial configurations such as centre-periphery and Ideal-Real structures. Findings show that identity is systematically foregrounded through compositional strategies, including centralization of key participants, strategic Ideal positioning to project agency, and the integration of textual and visual resources to direct audience interpretation. The study advances multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating that information value is not merely a formal compositional feature but a critical mechanism for constructing identity, credibility, and social positioning in digital contexts.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis; information value; digital identity; online self-presentation; social semiotics.

Introduction

In contemporary digital environments, self-presentation has become an inherently multimodal practice in which visual, verbal, and spatial resources interact to construct and communicate identity. Social media platforms and personal web spaces enable users to curate and perform aspects of the self, signaling affiliations, values, and social roles to diverse audiences. As a result, understanding identity construction in digital contexts requires attention not only to content but also to how meaning is organized through multimodal composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt, 2013).

Information value, rooted in systemic-functional linguistics and extended within multimodal discourse analysis, provides a useful framework for examining how semiotic elements are arranged to foreground or background meaning (Halliday, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In digital texts, the positioning and sequencing of images, language, and layout elements shape salience and guide interpretation. Compositional structures such as centre-periphery and Ideal-Real configurations play a key role in directing attention and constructing meaning, including the representation of identity.

Situated within social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis, this study examines how information value is deployed in online self-presentation. It focuses on how spatial organization and modal integration are used to foreground identity and influence audience perception in digitally mediated environments.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing body of research on digital identity, many studies remain predominantly text-focused or psychologically oriented, with limited attention to the multimodal organization of meaning. This has led to an under-exploration of how compositional structures—particularly information value—function as resources for foregrounding identity in online contexts.

Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how users strategically arrange verbal, visual, and typographical elements to emphasize identity markers, guide interpretation, and negotiate social positioning. Without examining these compositional dynamics, analyses of online self-presentation remain incomplete. This study therefore addresses this gap by investigating how information value operates within multimodal texts to foreground identity in digital environments.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how information value functions as a semiotic resource for foregrounding identity in online self-presentation. The objectives are to:

1. analyze the organization of verbal, visual, and typographical elements in online self-presentation,
2. examine how compositional structures (centre–periphery and Ideal–Real) foreground identity markers.
3. identify the multimodal strategies used to construct identity and manage social positioning.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on digital identity by extending analysis beyond text-centered approaches and emphasizing the role of compositional organization in meaning-making. It advances multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating how information value operates as a key resource for structuring identity in digital contexts.

Methodologically, the study offers a framework for analyzing online self-presentation as a multimodal system, highlighting the interaction of verbal, visual, and spatial elements. Practically, the findings provide insights into digital communication practices, including social media engagement and online branding, by showing how identity can be strategically foregrounded to influence audience perception.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Online Self-Presentation

Understanding online self-presentation begins with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, which conceptualizes identity as a social performance in which individuals manage impressions to influence audience perception. This framework has been foundational in digital communication research, highlighting how self-presentation is purposeful and contextually mediated. Extending Goffman's ideas, boyd (2010) examined social media spaces, showing that digital platforms provide a "front stage" for users to curate identities through selective disclosure and audience management, reflecting both personal and

social dimensions of selfhood. Hogan (2010) similarly emphasized that online spaces amplify visibility and audience diversity, increasing the stakes for impression management. These foundational perspectives underscore that identity construction is performative, intentional, and highly sensitive to the affordances of digital platforms.

While early research focused on textual self-disclosure, the multimodal nature of online communication necessitates broader analytical frameworks. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) introduced the concept of multimodality, emphasizing that meaning is co-constructed across multiple semiotic resources, including language, image, layout, and typography. Jewitt (2008) further illustrated that online identity is not solely textual but emerges from the interaction of visual and verbal modes, which collectively signal social position, personality, and aspirational selfhood.

Multimodal Perspectives on Digital Identity

The integration of visual, verbal, and design elements has become central to the study of online self-presentation. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) highlights that each semiotic mode contributes differently to meaning, with images conveying affective and symbolic content, text providing explicit propositions, and layout structuring audience attention (Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala (2017) demonstrated that profile images on social networking sites communicate social status, personal traits, and affiliations, extending Goffman's performative framework into visual semiotics. Similarly, Chua and Chang (2016) found that Instagram users employ filters, composition, and captioning to create cohesive visual narratives that foreground desired aspects of identity. These findings indicate that online self-presentation is an intentional orchestration of multiple modes rather than a simple reflection of textual disclosure.

Furthermore, contemporary research on social media influencers highlights the strategic use of multimodality for branding purposes. Marwick (2013) observed that influencers rely on visual consistency, repeated motifs, and careful sequencing of images to construct a coherent public persona, while Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) showed that textual overlays, emojis, and graphic enhancements work in tandem with images to communicate aspirational identity traits. Vitak, Crouse, and LaRose (2011) added that the placement of professional achievements and high-quality visual elements enhances perceived credibility, demonstrating the social consequences of foregrounding choices.

Information Value and Foregrounding in Multimodal Texts

The concept of information value from systemic-functional linguistics provides a critical lens for understanding how identity is foregrounded in multimodal online communication (Halliday, 1994). Information value posits that the spatial positioning of elements within a composition—such as top versus bottom, left versus right, or center versus periphery—affects their prominence and interpretive weight. Foregrounded elements attract immediate attention and are perceived as more significant, while backgrounded elements provide contextual or supporting meaning (van Leeuwen, 2005; Bateman, 2014). O'Halloran (2011) applied this concept to visual and multimodal texts, noting that spatial arrangements and sequencing of verbal, visual, and typographic elements guide audience interpretation and shape perceived social meaning.

Despite its theoretical relevance, the systematic application of information value in online self-presentation is limited. Most empirical research describes visual or textual practices without explicitly analyzing how compositional foregrounding emphasizes identity markers (Vitak et al., 2011; Chua & Chang, 2016). Consequently, the semiotic logic underlying positional prominence and hierarchical organization in digital self-presentation remains underexplored.

Empirical Evidence on Multimodal Identity Construction

Empirical studies confirm that multimodal resources are strategically used to construct digital identities. Marwick (2013) found that Instagram influencers deploy consistent visual themes, motifs, and placement strategies to create coherent identity narratives. Chua and Chang (2016) showed that ordinary users similarly leverage filters, post sequencing, and captions to communicate social values and personality traits. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) highlighted that graphic overlays and emoji use further enhance the salience of identity elements. Zhao et al. (2008) demonstrated that even basic profile images function as salient markers of social identity and status. These studies collectively suggest that foregrounding through spatial, visual, and textual means is a central tool for impression management and identity negotiation.

Vitak et al. (2011) provide further empirical support, illustrating that foregrounded achievements and visually prominent content influence perceived credibility and authenticity. O'Halloran (2011) notes that multimodal foregrounding is culturally patterned, relying on shared conventions of visual processing, while van Leeuwen (2005) underscores that foregrounded elements are not only attention-grabbing but socially meaningful, signaling priority and value to the audience.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the richness of these studies, gaps remain. Most research either emphasizes influencers and professional users or examines visual and textual modes in isolation, without fully integrating the concept of information value. Everyday users' multimodal strategies for foregrounding identity across social, professional, and aspirational contexts are underexplored. Additionally, while foregrounding has clear implications for audience perception, few studies systematically link compositional prominence with interpretive outcomes, such as perceived credibility or social alignment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social semiotics and systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), drawing particularly on the frameworks of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Halliday (1994). Social semiotics views meaning-making as a socially situated process in which individuals use semiotic resources—language, images, layout, and design—to negotiate identity, construct social roles, and communicate values. Online self-presentation, from this perspective, is not merely descriptive but performative, with users intentionally selecting and arranging multimodal resources to foreground aspects of the self and influence audience perception (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Complementing social semiotics, the concept of information value from SFL provides a mechanism for understanding foregrounding in multimodal compositions. Information value posits that the spatial placement of elements—such as top versus bottom, left versus right, or center versus periphery—signals their relative importance and guides audience attention and interpretation (Halliday, 1994; Bateman, 2014). In online self-presentation, images, captions, and typographic features positioned prominently function as foregrounded elements, highlighting salient identity traits, while backgrounded elements provide context or supplementary meaning. Together, these frameworks enable an integrated analysis of both the content and compositional organization of identity in digital environments, bridging social and structural dimensions of meaning-making.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) approach, which is well-suited for examining how verbal, visual, and typographic modes interact to construct identity in online self-presentation (Jewitt, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Data were collected from publicly accessible social media profiles, including Instagram, Facebook, and personal blogs, selected through purposive

sampling to capture profiles that displayed rich multimodal self-presentation features, such as profile images, bio texts, and posts with images, captions, layout arrangements, and typographic variations. A total of 4 profiles representing a diversity of age, gender, professional affiliation, and social media engagement patterns were analyzed. Screenshots and screen recordings were used to capture multimodal content, and each post and profile page was treated as a discrete multimodal text. The analysis focused on visual features (images, filters, colors, overlays), verbal features (captions, hashtags, bios), and typographic/spatial features (font style, size, placement, layout).

Data were coded and analyzed according to principles of social semiotics and information value, with attention to foregrounded identity elements, those occupying prominent positions, using bold or large fonts, or visually central, and backgrounded elements that provide context or supplementary meaning. Mode interaction was also examined to understand how verbal, visual, and typographic resources collaboratively enhance salience and communicate identity. The coding process was iterative, moving from descriptive coding of semiotic features to interpretive analysis of recurring patterns in foregrounding and identity construction, supported by qualitative analysis software to organize codes and visualize compositional strategies. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including the use of publicly accessible profiles, anonymization of personal identifiers, and exclusion of sensitive content. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of multiple profiles and multimodal elements, documentation of coding decisions, and systematic interpretive procedures, enhancing the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings.

Data Analysis

Information value refers to how the spatial arrangement of elements within a visual composition contributes to meaning-making and ideological positioning. Within Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, meaning is structured through culturally recognizable zones such as **left/right (Given–New)**, **top/bottom (Ideal–Real)**, and **centre/margin (Centre–Peripheral)**. These spatial conventions not only guide viewers' reading paths but also play a crucial role in foregrounding identity, particularly in online self-presentation where visual design substitutes for verbal self-description. The analysis below examines how information value is mobilized across the images to prioritize identity, action, and relational meanings.

Image 1



Image 1 features a single female participant wearing eyeglasses and looking directly at the viewer. The participant occupies approximately 80 percent of the frame, while the background, a building wall, remains visually muted and peripheral. The composition does not conform to a clear **Given–New** or **Ideal–Real** structure. Instead, meaning is organized through a centre–periphery configuration, with the woman positioned as the sole nucleus of information.

This central placement foregrounds identity as the primary communicative resource. By excluding textual elements and minimizing contextual cues, the image constructs identity as self-sufficient and visually legible. The participant's presence, appearance, and gaze are positioned to carry the full semiotic

load, suggesting an intentional strategy of self-presentation in which individuality and visibility take precedence over narrative explanation. Information value here functions to isolate and amplify personal identity, aligning with the performative logic of online visual culture.

Image 2



Image 2 depicts a woman engaged in the activity of mixing milk with another substance in a cup, with a bowl of food positioned nearby. Unlike Image 1, the participant's attention is directed toward the task rather than the viewer, foregrounding action over direct engagement. The image displays a clear **Ideal–Real** structure: the woman dominates the upper portion of the frame, while the food items and containers occupy the lower section.

Within this configuration, the participant is positioned in the **Ideal** zone, representing intention, expertise, and purposeful engagement. The objects below function as the **Real**, grounding the image in material practice and everyday activity. The woman's larger size and spatial dominance reinforce her informational prominence, constructing identity not merely as appearance but as competence-in-action. Information value thus operates to elevate process and agency, presenting the participant as knowledgeable and skilled within a familiar domestic or lifestyle context.

Image 3



Image 3 integrates written text, an emoji, and a male participant holding a jar of smoked fish. The composition exhibits a layered **vertical information structure**. The top-positioned text occupies the **Ideal** zone, introducing abstract or promotional claims. The man holding the product, accompanied by an emoji, is centrally positioned, forming the **Centre** and serving as the focal point of the representation. Additional text at the bottom occupies the **Real** zone, providing concrete or explanatory information.

This structured sequencing creates a controlled reading path that tightly manages interpretation. Identity is foregrounded through association: the participant's central placement aligns him with the product, while the emoji adds affective and interpersonal resonance. Information value here functions to stabilize meaning by anchoring visual identity within a promotional discourse. The participant's identity is

thus constructed relationally—through text, product, and affect—rather than as an autonomous visual presence.

Image 4



Image 4 presents two participants, a man and a woman, alongside a caption, all positioned centrally within the frame. The composition lacks clear **Ideal–Real** or **Given–New** distinctions, resulting in a **neutral information value structure**. Neither the visual nor the textual elements are hierarchically privileged; instead, they jointly occupy the centre as a unified message.

This absence of spatial hierarchy encourages viewers to process the participants and caption simultaneously. Identity is foregrounded through co-presence and relational alignment rather than through spatial contrast or emphasis. The neutral information value suggests that the producer prioritizes recognizability and shared representation over ideological framing, presenting identity as collective and socially situated rather than individualized or aspirational.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that information value functions as a central semiotic resource for foregrounding identity in online self-presentation. Across the analyzed images, spatial organization is systematically employed to prioritize certain aspects of identity, such as visibility, competence, relationality, and credibility; while marginalizing contextual or background elements. These patterns confirm that meaning in digital self-representations is not accidental but carefully designed through compositional choices that guide viewer interpretation.

A dominant pattern emerging from the analysis is the use of centralization to construct identity as the core message. Images that position participants at the centre of the composition minimize peripheral elements and reduce interpretive ambiguity. This strategy aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) assertion that centrally placed elements function as the nucleus of meaning. In the context of online self-presentation, such centralization elevates the individual as the primary communicative focus, allowing identity to be read visually rather than explained verbally. The absence or minimization of textual anchorage in these cases further suggests an assumption that identity can be immediately recognized and validated through visual cues alone.

Another significant finding concerns the deployment of Ideal–Real structures to emphasize agency and competence. Where participants occupy the Ideal zone, their actions and roles are conceptualized as intentional, aspirational, or socially valued, while objects and material outcomes are relegated to the Real zone. This spatial arrangement constructs identity as process-oriented rather than object-oriented, foregrounding what individuals *do* rather than what they merely possess. In online environments, this

supports the presentation of identity as active and skilled, reinforcing credibility and authority through visual design rather than explicit claims.

The analysis also reveals that textual elements play a crucial anchoring role when identity is tied to promotion or endorsement. In multimodally dense images, the vertical layering of Ideal text, central participant, and Real explanatory content produces a controlled reading path that stabilizes interpretation. Here, identity is not presented as autonomous but as relational—constructed through alignment with products, messages, or values. This finding underscores the increasing convergence of personal identity and promotional discourse in digital spaces, where self-presentation often intersects with branding and commodification.

Conversely, images that adopt a neutral information value structure foreground identity through relational balance rather than spatial hierarchy. By positioning participants and captions centrally without clear informational zones, these representations emphasize co-presence and shared visibility. Identity in such cases is constructed as socially embedded and collective, reflecting a shift from individualized self-promotion toward representational authenticity and interpersonal connection. This strategy suggests that neutrality in information value can itself be meaningful, signaling equality, solidarity, or mutual recognition.

Overall, the findings affirm that information value is not merely a formal compositional feature but a strategic meaning-making resource in online self-presentation. Through centralization, vertical hierarchy, and neutral alignment, image producers actively shape how identity is perceived, evaluated, and interpreted. These strategies reflect broader digital communication practices in which visual design operates as a primary site for identity construction, often surpassing verbal language in communicative force.

Conclusion

This study has examined how information value functions as a semiotic resource for foregrounding identity in online self-presentation, drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to analyze spatial organization in selected images. The analysis demonstrates that identity construction in digital visuals is not incidental but systematically shaped through compositional choices that guide attention, prioritize meaning, and regulate interpretation.

Across the images, centralization emerged as a dominant strategy for positioning participants as the primary carriers of meaning, while Ideal–Real structures were used to elevate agency, competence, and intention over material outcomes. In multimodal dense representations, vertical layering of text and image created controlled reading paths that anchored identity within promotional or explanatory discourses. Where hierarchical ordering was absent, neutral information value configurations foregrounded relational and collective identity through visual balance and co-presence.

By foregrounding identity through spatial arrangement rather than explicit verbalization, online self-presentations rely heavily on visual design to communicate who is important, what is valued, and how participants should be interpreted. The study thus contributes to multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating that information value operates not only as a compositional principle but as an ideological mechanism through which identities are made visible, credible, and socially meaningful in digital contexts.

Overall, the findings reinforce the centrality of information value in understanding contemporary visual communication and highlight its analytical relevance for examining identity construction in online environments.

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