

A Study on Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords: Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Jin Li

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou 311100, China

Email: 875947561@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Li, J. (2025). A Study on Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords: Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 79 - 89. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9078>

Published: 2025-08-25

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Abstract

With the rapid rise of online communication, internet buzzwords have become integral to daily life, attracting attention from linguists and cognitive experts. Among these, identity-related buzzwords carry rich social and cultural meanings, serving as tools for expressing emotions, attitudes, and social concepts. However, limited research categorizes these buzzwords as a distinct group. This study, grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, explores the conceptual metaphors within identity-related internet buzzwords and their influence on semantic generalization. Findings reveal that identity-related buzzwords feature structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors, with entity metaphors being most prevalent. The source domains of these metaphors often reflect tangible objects, while the target domains represent abstract human qualities.

Keywords

Identity-related internet buzzwords; conceptual metaphor theory; semantic generalization

1. Introduction

With the internet's rapid growth, online communication has become vital, and many new words, or internet buzzwords, have emerged to express emotions and attitudes (Kang & Yin, 2023). These buzzwords, characterized by their concise and humorous nature, reflect daily life and societal issues (Cao, 2019). A subset of these buzzwords, called identity-related internet buzzwords, describe individual behaviors, traits, and social roles. These terms, often neologisms or abbreviations, reflect evolving language adapted to new online environments and signify group identity or cultural affiliation.

Some identity-related buzzwords incorporate metaphors, offering a richer depiction of culture. Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980) views metaphors as cognitive tools integral to human language. This theory has become central in cognitive linguistics, though its application to internet buzzwords remains underexplored. Investigating the metaphors in identity-related buzzwords can uncover

the social and cultural meanings they carry.

This study aims to analyze the conceptual metaphors in identity-related internet buzzwords. These buzzwords, frequently used in online communication (Chen, 2011), often carry metaphors that shape their meaning and usage. By applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this research extends the theory's application beyond literature and translation to online communication. The significance of this study lies in its practical insights into online communication and its academic contribution to cognitive linguistics by exploring metaphorical phenomena in internet buzzwords.

2. Internet Buzzwords

Although the term “internet buzzwords” has a relatively short history, its social impact is significant, and it has attracted considerable commentary. Current academic research on internet buzzwords primarily spans five perspectives: linguistics, communication studies, sociology, translation studies, and education. This research mainly focuses on relevant studies in the field of linguistics.

Linguistic studies often concentrate on specific buzzwords or those with unique structural features, analyzing phonetics, semantics, and other linguistic aspects. Research on semantics is particularly prevalent. For instance, Chen & Zhang (2023) explored the internet buzzword “Lie flat,” identifying three stages of semantic generalization: metaphorization, abstraction, and blending, reflecting the stress responses of youth to societal pressures. Similarly, Ni (2023) traced the semantic evolution of “planting grass” through metaphor, highlighting linguistic economy as a key factor in its popularity. These studies emphasize how metaphors shape the meaning and societal significance of buzzwords. Structural analyses, such as Lu (2023), explored “XX zi” buzzwords, attributing their emergence to dialect, gender dynamics, and meme culture. These studies reveal how structural features contribute to the spread and usage of internet buzzwords.

Moreover, identity-related internet buzzwords represent a distinct category within the spectrum of internet buzzwords. For instance, buzzwords structured as “X ren” and “X jing” are popular and contain metaphorical meanings (Yang, 2022). The youth identity label “Small-town Swot” reflects the confused identity status of the youth group, demonstrating the self-reflection of the youth group and their attempts to reintegrate into society (Yan & Guan, 2023). According to existing studies, identity-related internet buzzwords form a distinct subset within the realm of online terminology, embodying metaphorical meanings that resonate with contemporary societal norms and reflect the evolving mindset of various demographic groups.

In summary, research on internet buzzwords encompasses multiple disciplines and emphasizes linguistic and societal dynamics. As for identity-related buzzwords, most of them analyzed in current research contains metaphorical meanings, reflecting and shaping contemporary societal norms and individual identities. However, there remains a gap in research, with few studies specifically categorizing identi-

ty-related internet buzzwords into a unified group and incorporating them into the theory of conceptual metaphor. Therefore, there is still room for further exploration in this area.

3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The conceptual metaphor theory is an important component of cognitive linguistics theory, initially proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) in their collaborative book *Metaphors We Live By*. Since its inception, this theory has increasingly become a focal point of research in cognitive linguistics. It posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which we understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones. According to this theory, our conceptual system is structured by metaphor, and everyday language is rife with metaphorical expressions that reflect underlying conceptual metaphors. These conceptual metaphors serve as cognitive tools that shape our perception, reasoning, and understanding of the world around us. Overall, conceptual metaphor theory provides insights into how our conceptual system is organized and how metaphorical thinking influences our cognition and language use.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphors are divided into three types: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors.

Structural Metaphors involve transferring the conceptual structure of a source domain to that of a target domain, allowing individuals to understand one concept through the framework of another. This type of metaphor provides a structure for understanding abstract concepts by using a more concrete domain. For example, concepts from war can structure how we understand arguments, framing them in terms of defense, attack, and victory.

Oriental Metaphors are grounded in physical orientation and human bodily experiences, associating abstract concepts with spatial directions. These metaphors are culturally significant and often follow systematic patterns such as “up is good, down is bad” or “more is better, less is worse.” They reflect human spatial experiences and offer a way of conceptualizing emotions or states in terms of spatial metaphors, such as associating happiness with “up” and sadness with “down.”

Ontological Metaphors involve conceptualizing abstract entities, such as emotions, thoughts, or psychological states, as tangible objects. This type of metaphor enables people to perceive abstract phenomena in quantifiable or visual terms, often making them seem physical or material. Ontological metaphors can be further classified into container metaphors, personification metaphors, and entity metaphors. For instance, time can be viewed as a resource (TIME IS MONEY), allowing people to describe it in terms of investment, loss, or savings.

Each metaphor type frames experiences differently, shaping how individuals under-

stand and relate to abstract concepts. Importantly, some metaphorical expressions may combine elements from more than one category, requiring a nuanced analysis to fully capture their conceptual richness.

4. Data and Methods

The identity-related internet buzzwords in this study are mainly collected from the magazine *Yao Wen Jiao Zi*, supplemented by *Youth Digest* magazine. The fundamental principle behind these magazines' selection of internet buzzwords is based on intelligent information processing of big data from a corpus. This corpus contains real language materials that have appeared in actual online language use, including language materials from news websites and social media. Moreover, these magazines select words that exhibit a certain continuity and linguistic innovation during their selection process. Therefore, the top 10 internet buzzwords selected annually by these magazines have reliable sources and reflect social hot topics of a certain period.

After collecting the internet buzzwords from 2013 to 2023 as selected by these magazines, this study identified words related to identity and further screened out identity-related internet buzzwords with metaphors. Words related to identity refer to those that, in usage, denote a certain group of people with specific characteristics related to behavior, qualities, features, etc. Metaphorical ones indicate that the word itself refers to something different from the group of people it represents in the online context. **Table 1** are the identity-related internet buzzwords selected as research materials:

Table 1. 2013-2023 Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords

Number	Year	Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords	Source
(1)	2023	xian yan bao (a noticeable protrusion)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(2)	2022	XX tian hua ban (XX ceiling)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(3)	2020	gong ju ren (tool man)	<i>Youth Digest</i>
(4)	2020	hou lang (back waves)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(5)	2020	shen shou (mythical creatures)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(6)	2019	ning meng jing (lemon goblin)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(7)	2018	fo xi XX (Buddha-like XX)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>
(8)	2018	ju ying (giant infant)	<i>Yao Wen Jiao Zi</i>

After collecting all these Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords, this study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze identity-related internet buzzwords by combining linguistic analysis with cognitive metaphor theory. Through this method, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how metaphorical expressions in online language reflect and influence contemporary social identities.

5. Findings

5.1. Structural Metaphors

The main feature of structural metaphor is to map the organizational structure of source domain onto target domain, thereby forming a metaphorical expression. In identity-related internet buzzwords, there are few words containing structural metaphor, some examples of which are as follows:

XX tian hua ban:

- (1) What makes social anxiety sufferers envious is the group of “social cows” referred to as the “human social ceiling”.
- (2) She is a graduate of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, a blogger with nearly 500,000 followers on social media platforms, and also regarded as the “beauty ceiling” of the Chinese women’s football team.
- (3) A person who strides out with great momentum is truly the “military training ceiling”.

The literal meaning of “tian hua ban” (ceiling) refers to the surface at the top of a building’s interior, while its metaphorical usage is quite common in language, being widely employed to describe various limitations, obstacles, or extreme situations, such as “shen zhi tian hua ban” (promotion ceiling), “xing bie tian hua ban” (gender ceiling), etc. When describing identity, “XX” often represents a certain aspect of the individual’s abilities or characteristics, such as social skills, appearance, and performance in military training, as depicted in above examples. This metaphorical approach maps the physical structure of a building onto the individual’s level of ability, where different people’s levels are akin to different parts within the building, with the ceiling being the topmost, hardest-to-reach part that people look up to. Hence, the metaphorical meaning of “XX tian hua ban” suggests that an individual’s ability is difficult to surpass and is something that people aspire to. Therefore, it can be inferred that “XX tian hua ban” contains structural metaphor, mapping the source domain of “tian hua ban” onto the target domain of a certain ability concept, implying the highest level or extent that an individual can reach in a certain field or group. This metaphor, presented through the image of a ceiling, possesses strong visual and perceptual qualities, making it easier to understand the implied meaning.

5.2. Orientational Metaphors

Orientational metaphor refers to a series of metaphors formed through reference to orientation, which are used to understand some abstract concepts. Orientational metaphors typically involve words related to physical spatial orientation, such as “up and down,” “left and right,” “front and back,” and so on. In terms of identity-related internet buzzwords, the following words contain orientational metaphors:

Hou lang :

- (4) As a “back waves” in Yi embroidery, Chen Haiyan already has five or six peers of the same age accompanying her.
- (5) Under the guidance and influence of their predecessors, waves of young

talents have come to understand the importance of dedication and responsibility.

- (6) Three years ago, she returned to her hometown of Huzhou to become a selected cadre, venturing into the vast field of grassroots work as a surging “back wave”.

“Hou lang” literally refers to the emerging water waves. In Chinese, “hou” (back) contrasts with “qian” (before): “Qian” represents the direction towards the future, so the “qian lang” (front wave) arrives first, while the “hou lang” (back wave) follows behind. “Hou” symbolizes the newly arisen, and “hou lang” metaphorically refers to the new generation, namely the emerging talents who stand out in a particular field. For example, in sentence 4, Chen Haiyan is referred to as the “hou lang” in the field of Yi embroidery, indicating that she is an emerging figure with new vitality in this field. In sentence 5, “qianbei” (predecessors) and “hou lang” reflect the relationship of succession, representing a mapping of water waves’ relationship. In sentence 6, “hou lang” symbolizes the new generation of talents taking on responsibilities and surging forward in grassroots work, demonstrating their vigor and vitality. This orientational metaphor maps the “front and back” moving direction of water waves to the abstract concept of succession between predecessors and successors. It signifies the order of time while also implying the emergence and growth of a new generation of talents in a certain field, injecting fresh vitality and momentum into its development.

XX tian hua ban:

As mentioned before, this term contains a structural metaphor. In architecture, the ceiling is located at the top of the room. Therefore, “tian hua ban” also represents the direction of “up”. Hence, “XX tian hua ban” also contains an orientational metaphor. “Up” and “down” are a pair of orientational terms, where “up” refers to the spatial position represented by “ceiling”, contrast to the space below the ceiling, which embodies a vertical spatial relationship between up and down. This orientational metaphor maps the spatial relationship of “up” and “down” onto the hierarchical relationship of abilities, where “up” represents the highest level of ability. This also reflects the cognitive understanding that development involves pursuit towards higher levels, emphasizing the concept of striving upwards and overcoming limitations.

5.3. Ontological Metaphors

The characteristic of ontological metaphor is to project abstract concepts onto concrete entities, linking abstract concepts or objects with tangible entities, thereby deepening the understanding of abstract concepts or objects. Ontological metaphor can also be subdivided into container metaphor, personification metaphor, and entity metaphor. It is worth noting that among the identity-related internet buzzwords studied, there are none containing container metaphors; only personification meta-

phors and entity metaphors are present. The specific analysis is as follows:

5.3.1. Personification Metaphors

Generally, personification metaphor takes humans as the source domain, while the target domain can be broadly divided into three categories: animals and plants, inanimate objects, and abstract concepts. This form of metaphor projects human characteristics, emotions, or behaviors to entities within the target domain, endowing them with human attributes. Among the buzzwords studied, the following exhibit personification metaphors:

Ning meng jing:

- (7) Many people couldn't help but turn into "lemon goblin": "Looking at others' achievements at 24, I feel 'sour'!"
- (8) As Liu Genghong gained popularity, as expected, the green media in the island immediately emerged to play the role of "lemon goblin".

One of the main features of lemon is its sourness, and in Chinese culture, sourness can signify envy or jealousy. For instance, in example 7, "sour" expresses the speaker's feelings of envy when comparing himself to others. As a property of lemon, sourness is metaphorically attributed with negative human emotions such as envy or resentment, thus "ning meng jing" also possesses human attributes, creating a vivid and relatable image in expressing feelings of dissatisfaction. For example, in example 8, "ning meng jing" refers to those who feel envious of Liu Genghong's popularity. Therefore, as an identity label, "ning meng jing" is imbued with human emotions, exhibiting personification metaphor, which attributes human characteristics to the lemon fruit and then uses "ning meng jing" to represent people who possess these features.

5.3.2. Entity Metaphors

The major metaphor in ontological metaphor is entity metaphor. Entity metaphor typically metaphorizes abstract concepts or emotions into concrete, materialized forms, making them more specific and easier to understand and perceive. The following identity-related internet buzzwords contain entity metaphors:

Xian yan bao:

- (9) She pinned up her hair and adorned it with a traditional-style hairpin, becoming the "a noticeable protrusion" at the exhibition.

The original meaning of "xian yan bao" refers to a noticeable protrusion or swelling. In view of this feature, "xian yan bao", as an identity label, typically describe someone who stands out from the crowd due to a distinctive aspect. For instance, in example 7, "she" draws attention and appears unique because of her floral hairpin. In this usage, the conspicuous characteristic of "xian yan bao" is metaphorically attributed to individuals with attention-grabbing traits, making their qualities more tangible and vivid. Therefore, "xian yan bao" falls under the category of ontological

metaphors, specifically entity metaphors, as it involves mapping the feature of a noticeable protrusion onto people who are attractive, thus concretizing abstract human qualities into tangible entities.

Shen shou:

(10) Over the years, as the days approach when the “mythical creatures return to their cages,” holiday assignments become a hot topic.

(11) As the new school term approaches, for parents, there’s the joy of sending the mythical creatures back to campus on one hand, and the unavoidable mention of winter holiday assignments on the other.

“Shen shou” inherently exhibit animalistic traits, being full of vitality and difficult to tame. Parents use “shen shou” to liken children studying at home to mythical creatures, implying that they unleash their natural tendencies and become mischievous and playful. For instance, as seen in the provided examples, children on holiday and studying at home can be metaphorically referred to as “shen shou.” Their penchant for playfulness often leads to homework becoming a recurring issue, prompting parents to hope for their return to school. This expression, mapping the features of “shen shou” to children studying at home, vividly captures the nature of children, and materialize it into the form of mythical creatures, thereby exemplifying entity metaphor.

Gong ju ren:

(12) In the fan club, “student fans” are basically just tool men, directed wherever the “big fans” point.

(13) Especially, some students, due to their lack of experience, are easily deceived by trivial gains in front of them, becoming tool man for fraud.

The characteristic of “gong ju ren” is that they are always being directed and taken advantage of by others, akin to the function of tools when used by people. For example, in sentence 14, “student fans” are exploited by “big fans”, and in example 15, students are taken advantage of by scammers, resembling tools. In this context, the term “gong ju ren” maps the feature of tools onto people who are utilized by others like tools, highlighting the traits of this group of people. Metaphorically, it likens abstract concepts such as assistance and selflessness to tangible entities. Therefore, “gong ju ren” falls under the category of ontological metaphors, specifically entity metaphors.

Fo xi XX:

(14) For a “Buddha-like” blogger who only posts videos ten times a year, Zhao Qi’s attitude towards gaining followers is: laissez-faire.)

(15) This requires young people today to have a sense of urgency and not wait for opportunities. When striving, they should not choose comfort and avoid being “Buddha-like youth”.

In this term, “fo xi” refers to a certain attitude towards life, drawing on Buddhist philosophy; “XX” often represents a certain identity, such as “bo zhu” (blogger),

“qing nian” (youth) in above examples. In this context, “fo xi” materializes this attitude towards life into a tangible entity or object, namely “Buddha,” implying individuals named “fo xi XX” possess a “Buddhist-style” attitude. This method of materialization, mapping the feature of Buddha onto people who exhibit a Buddha-like attitude towards life, transforms the abstract attitude into a concrete entity. This makes it easier for people to understand and perceive the characteristics of this attitude. Therefore, it falls under the category of orientational metaphor, specifically an entity metaphor.

Ju ying:

(16) University is a crucial stage for students to grow into independent individuals, yet university parent groups still treat students as being managed, which undermines the educational philosophy of universities and fosters a culture of “giant infants.”

(17) Little do they realize that indulging children as “rich second generation” may likely breed arrogant and entitled “giant infants” who lack restraint.

“Ju ying” literally means “giant baby,” where “ying” refers to an infant, who is immature both physically and mentally, but “ju” indicates physical growth. Therefore, “ju ying” implies psychologically immature adults who are emotionally fragile and selfish. The formation of “ju ying” is often associated with parents, as indicated in the examples provided above, so this term is commonly used to remind parents to pay attention to their child-rearing methods. “Ju ying” metaphorizes psychological characteristics such as immaturity, selfishness, and fragility as a tangible entity. This expression helps parents better understand the psychological traits of such adults and serves as a reminder. Therefore, it falls under the category of ontological metaphor, specifically an entity metaphor.

Upon synthesizing the aforementioned analysis, the conceptual metaphors contained in identity-related internet buzzwords are distributed as follows:

Table 2. The distribution of conceptual metaphors in identity-related internet buzzwords

Conceptual Metaphor Types		Identity-Related Internet Buzzwords	Total
Structural		XX tian hua ban (XX ceiling)	1
Oriental		XX tian hua ban (XX ceiling) hou lang (back waves)	2
Ontological	Personification	ning meng jing (lemon goblin)	1
	Entity	shen shou (mythical creatures)	5
		xian yan bao (a noticeable protrusion)	
		gong ju ren (tool man)	
		fo xi XX (Buddha-like XX)	
		ju ying (giant infant)	

It becomes evident that identity-related internet buzzwords encompass three primary categories of conceptual metaphors: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors, with entity metaphors being the most prevalent. Moreover, the source domains in these metaphors predominantly consist of familiar tangible objects from daily life, such as “ceiling,” “baby,” “tool,” “Buddha,” etc., while

the target domains relate to various human qualities like ability, psychological immaturity, helpfulness, etc. These observations shed light on human cognitive tendencies, which often rely on perceptions and experiences of the physical world. In another word, people tend to employ familiar, concrete objects to interpret abstract concepts. By associating these abstract concepts with tangible objects, their meanings are vividly illustrated, facilitating comprehension and acceptance. Furthermore, this also reflects the characteristics of instant and efficient communication on the internet, where people usually convey a large amount of effective information in a short period of time. Hence, individuals frequently resort to employing vivid and imaginative metaphors to articulate complex emotions and ideas, thereby optimizing the efficacy of online communication.

5. Conclusion

With the continuous development and refinement of internet language, internet buzzwords have become a common mode of expression in online communication. However, many of these buzzwords are not used in their literal sense, especially identity-related internet buzzwords. The meanings of these buzzwords often carry metaphorical connotations. In this study, the author employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the theoretical framework to conduct an in-depth analysis of identity-related internet buzzwords, focusing on their conceptual metaphors and the process of semantic generalization.

Through the analysis of these words, identity-related internet buzzwords encompass three main categories of conceptual metaphors: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Among these, ontological metaphors, particularly entity metaphors, are the most widespread. The source domain of these metaphors are typically tangible objects encountered in daily life, such as “ceiling,” “wave,” “tool,” etc., while the target domain pertains to abstract concepts, ranging from personality traits, ability, or emotions. This phenomenon reflects people’s cognitive habits, that is understanding emerging, unfamiliar, and abstract concepts by leveraging familiar, concrete objects. Moreover, it highlights the nature of online communication, where imagery is used in a straightforward manner to enable others to quickly and clearly understand the intended message.

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