

Understanding Visual Usage in Text-based Computer-mediated Communication among Older Adults through the “Front Stage”

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Background

As Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory (1959) suggested, all human interactions are theatrical performances with a “front stage” and a “backstage.” People involved will perform impression management, a way of attempting to alter or control how others perceive them to achieve favourable interpersonal relations or fulfil social goals, either consciously or unconsciously.

In text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC), where nonverbal cues are absent, visual elements have served as a form of expressive equipment for users to develop impression management (Picone, 2015).

Older adults are generally regarded as “digital immigrants” with lower digital skills than their younger counterparts due to a later stage of technology adoption (Prensky, 2001). Owing to the growing dominance of text-based CMC, they cannot avoid engaging in this form of communication, regardless of their digital competence.

Research question (RQ): How do older adults use visual elements to develop impression management, which requires a certain level of digital skills, while interacting with their younger counterparts, whom they perceive as having better digital skills than they do?

To eliminate potential variations caused by different cultural backgrounds (Guntuku et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2023) and platform affordances (Miller et al., 2016; Hillberg et al., 2018), we focus only on traditional Chinese chat logs involving older adults aged over 60 years based in Hong Kong on WhatsApp, the most prevalent instant messaging app in our target region (Thomala, 2025).

Methods

Previous studies mainly rely on survey-based self-reported data from older adults (e.g., Gallud et al., 2018; Herring & Dainas, 2020; Boutet et al., 2024). We aim to supplement the current academic discourse with data obtained on the “front stage,” **collecting data of older adults from the young generation.**

Data collection: From 20th January to 3rd March 2026, we invited 10 volunteers aged 22-36 from multiple backgrounds (2 Males & 8 Females) through convenience and snowball sampling to contribute 10-20 screenshots of their everyday interactions with older adults aged 60 or above based in Hong Kong via Qualtrics.

Data analysis: Given the variety and complexity of semiotic codes involved in text-based CMC, we conducted **multimodal discourse analysis** (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) on our collected chat logs. We adopted **Jones and Pittman’s (1982) taxonomy of impression management strategies** as our analytical framework because it covered “most instances” of impression management (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 235) and was widely applied in impression management research over the decades (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 1999; Kuznekoff, 2013; Hashmi et al., 2025).

Inclusion criteria:
 ✓ Visual element(s) used by the older interlocutor
 ✓ The older interlocutors is 60 years old or above
 ✓ WhatsApp
 ✓ High resolution
 ✓ Clear background information

This study was approved by the Human and Artefacts Ethics Sub-Committee at CityUHK (HU-STA-00002089).

Findings

After screening the collected 112 screenshots with our inclusion criteria, we have 78 effective screenshots with 83 chat logs from June 2022 to February 2026, involving 26 older adults (6 Males & 20 Females) aged 60-79. Among them, **172 visual elements (N = 172)** are identified.

Through the analytical lens of Jones and Pittman’s (1982) taxonomy of impression management strategies, our multimodal discourse analysis on the collected real-life chat logs finds that:

Strategy	Ingratiation (n = 46; 27%)	Self-promotion (n = 96; 56%)	Exemplification (n = 13; 7%)	Supplication (n = 9; 5%)	Intimation (n = 8; 5%)
Definition	Using flattery, favours, or conforming to the interlocutors’ opinions to be likeable	Highlighting personal achievements, abilities, or skills to be perceived as competent	Projecting integrity or moral worthiness to establish moral superiority or to gain social power	Advertising dependencies or weaknesses to solicit help or sympathy	Using threats, anger, or displays of power to appear dangerous or authoritative
Older adults tended to use visual elements to...	<p>Compliment or be supportive</p> <p>(Male, 63y/o, Uncle-Nephew, 1:1)</p> <p>Be cute or kind to lower the authoritative tone as a senior</p> <p>(Male, 65y/o, Father-Daughter, 1:1)</p> <p>Emphasize gratitude towards the younger interlocutor(s)</p> <p>(Female, 68y/o, Client-Service provider, 1:1)</p>	<p>Showcase visual usage ability.</p> <p>Showcase digital skills</p> <p>(Male, 62y/o, Father-Daughter, Group)</p> <p>Showcase non-digital skills</p> <p>(Male, 62y/o, Uncle-Nephew, 1:1)</p>	<p>Convey politeness</p> <p>(Male, 61y/o, Father-Daughter, 1:1)</p> <p>Enhance personal reliability with photos as proofs</p> <p>(Female, 68y/o, Co-workers, 1:1)</p> <p>Reveal guilt to consolidate the family-oriented characteristics</p> <p>(Male, 62y/o, Father-Daughter, 1:1)</p>	<p>Reveal embarrassment</p> <p>(Female, 61y/o, Mother-Daughter, 1:1)</p> <p>Express cluelessness</p> <p>(Female, 60y/o, Mother-Son, 1:1)</p> <p>Show grievance or sadness to solicit sympathy</p> <p>(Female, 60y/o, Mother-Daughter, 1:1)</p>	<p>Projecting authority as a senior</p> <p>(Female, 63y/o, Mother-Daughter, 1:1)</p> <p>Command the younger interlocutor(s) to keep secret</p> <p>(Female, 68y/o, Client-Service provider, 1:1)</p> <p>(Female, 61y/o, Teacher-Student, 1:1)</p>

Discussion: Suggestions on enhancing visual engagement among older adults

Based on our current findings, older adults prefer to use a variety of visual elements as a self-promotion strategy, tending to showcase their digital skills to counter the stereotype of “digital immigrants.” However, their usage is primarily limited to morning greetings, festival blessings, and weather reminders.

Older adults also tend to replace emotional words, both positive and negative, with visual elements frequently, regardless of the impression management strategies used. Therefore, we suggest:

- Provide **a wide range of photo/video-editing templates beyond festive greetings** to encourage creative expression among older adults, which can help foster older adults’ mental health and overall well-being (e.g., Jean-Berluce, 2024); and
- Creation of **official stickers with emotional words AND pictures of daily morning greetings combined with updated information** (e.g., **health-related social policies**) that can be easily downloaded to facilitate the transmission and communication of accurate information.

What’s next?

- Involve a larger sample size with diverse sampling approaches
- Step into the “backstage”: Semi-structured interviews with older adults
- Comparative studies on different social groups, e.g., young vs. old, male vs. female, etc.

References

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