

Metaphorical Constructions of the “Institutional Self”: A Local Grammar Analysis of Institutional Identity on Weibo



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Abstract: This study explores how institutional discourse on social media constructs the “institutional self” through metaphorical expressions, with a focus on Weibo. Adopting the Discourse Dynamics Approach and local grammar analysis, this study investigates metaphor usage across various types of institutions, including government, corporations, media, universities, and international organizations. The findings reveal that metaphor is frequently employed in institutional discourse. Significant differences in metaphor usage are observed across institutional types, such as corporations’ tendency to use [human] metaphors to enhance affinity with the audience, while government posts favor [war] metaphors to highlight urgency and decision-making importance. Additionally, the study identifies distinct local grammar patterns in metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”, including variations in the positioning of metaphor topics and vehicles. By analyzing these patterns, the research demonstrates how metaphor not only functions as a stylistic tool but also serves as a strategic mechanism for institutions to construct their identities, engage with audiences, and manage communication in a dynamic digital environment. Ultimately, metaphors play a key role in shaping institutional self-presentation and public perception on social media platforms.

Keywords: Metaphor; Discourse Dynamics Approach; Local Grammar

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1 Introduction

Institutional discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, establishing authority, and fostering engagement with various audiences. In the digital era, institutional discourse has undergone significant transformations. Digital platforms like social media have provided institutions with unprecedented opportunities to engage directly with audiences, breaking traditional boundaries of communication [1]. On the other hand, these platforms require adaptive and innovative discursive practices to address rapid information exchange, diverse audience expectations, and heightened public scrutiny. Institutions must leverage digital affordances to construct and sustain their

identity in this evolving communicative environment.

Discursive constructions of the “institutional self” on social media may be reflected in metaphor use. Metaphor in cognitive linguistics is defined as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” [2]. Metaphor serves both as a cognitive tool closely associated with language and thought and as a powerful mechanism for promoting social action. Recurring co-texts of metaphor use for identity construction may form local grammatical patterns.

Local grammar, as an alternative to general grammars,

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focuses on describing specific meanings rather than the entirety of a language, with each local grammar addressing a particular discourse or communicative function [3]. This makes local grammar particularly adaptable to the Discourse Dynamics Approach to metaphor analysis, as both emphasize the interplay between linguistic forms and their discourse functions [3], and there is shared focus on “stretches of language” enables a holistic analysis of metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” on social media. However, previous studies have not applied local grammar analysis to metaphor, not to mention incorporating metaphor-related elements, such as vehicles, topics, and markers, into its framework. This gap hinders a systematic understanding of how metaphorical constructions function within the intersection of linguistic forms and discourse.

Therefore, the present study aims to gain understanding of metaphorical construction of the “institutional self” in online discourse of corporations, governmental institutions, media, universities and international organizations. Theoretically and methodologically, this study intends to adopt the Discourse Dynamics Approach to metaphor analysis and local grammar analysis approach, which may provide understanding of how metaphors are systematically employed to construct institutional identities across different types of institutional discourse.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Discourse Online

“Institutional discourse ... occurs within or is produced by institutions, such as governments, corporations, educational institutions, and other formal organizations” [4], and could be understood as ‘talk between an expert representing some authority and a layman’ [5]. Institutional discourse is characterized by three major features [6]. First, it is oriented toward achieving specific goals, tasks, or identities associated with the institution. Second, it operates within structured constraints that regulate what contributions are deemed acceptable in a given context. Third, it relies on context-specific inferential frameworks and procedures to guide interpretation and interaction. These features are particularly relevant to understanding how institutions construct their identity on social media platforms. On platforms like Weibo, institutions adapt their discourse to achieve goals such as audience engagement, brand promotion, or public trust [7], contributing to the construction

of a relatable and effective “institutional self”.

An institution is defined as “a socially legitimated expertise together with those persons authorized to implement it” [8]. Institutions “are not restricted to designated physical settings”, and “they can refer to any powerful group, such as the government or the media” [1].

“It is important to note that ‘new’ modes of communication, such as email, text messages, social media, and the Internet have also come to play an important role in institutional interactions” [1]. Previous studies have analyzed the discursive practices of various institutions, such as media organizations, universities, governments, and NGOs, on digital platforms like social media [4, 7, 9, 10]. Among these, the construction of institutional identity has emerged as a key research focus, such as institutional self-promotion of Chinese and American universities on websites [11]. Institutions strategically adapt their communication to shape perceptions, constructing the “institutional self” through discursive practices.

Most existing research approaches this topic from perspectives such as communication studies or management, with a focus on broader discursive practices like agenda-setting, self-legitimation, self-evaluation, and self-promotion. However, the construction of institutional identity inherently involves the strategic use of language to shape audiences’ understanding of the institution. This may require more fine-grained cognitive analyses, such as metaphor analysis from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, to uncover the underlying mechanisms of how institutions achieve these discursive goals.

2.2 Discourse Dynamics Approach to Metaphor Analysis

Discursive constructions of the institutional self on social media may be reflected in metaphor use. Metaphor in cognitive linguistics is defined as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” [2]. Metaphor has at least two major functions. First, Metaphor is “the most widely studied form of figurative language, and the one most closely associated with language and thought” [12]. Second, metaphors can also be utilized “as a tool for promoting social action” [13].

One important approach in metaphor research is the Discourse Dynamics Approach [14-17], which highlights the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of metaphor use in discourse. Unlike traditional cognitive metaphor theory

such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which views linguistic metaphors as instantiations of preexisting conceptual metaphors connecting source and target domains [18], the discourse dynamics approach focuses on the linguistic metaphor vehicle as the primary unit of analysis [15]. This perspective avoids assuming fixed conceptual mappings and instead investigates how metaphor vehicles function within specific discursive contexts to create meaning. By grouping metaphor vehicles and analyzing their patterns, the approach identifies systematicity across metaphors while maintaining a close connection to the language as used in real-time discourse.

Methodologically, the discourse dynamics approach introduces the concept of “soft assembly”, which describes how speakers dynamically construct and adjust their language in real-time to convey meaning effectively [17]. This flexibility extends to the unit of analysis, advocating for the examination of “stretches of language” as coherent metaphorical descriptions rather than isolated words or phrases [17]. Additionally, the approach employs cumulative frequency analysis instead of complex statistical techniques to uncover linguistic patterns, making it accessible and practical for analyzing extensive datasets [15]. These features allow researchers to capture the fluidity and interconnectedness of metaphor use, providing a robust framework for analyzing metaphors in diverse discursive contexts.

2.3 Local Grammar

Local grammar is considered an alternative approach, as opposed to general grammars, to language description [19]. It differs from general grammars in that each local grammar “seeks to account for one function or discourse act only” [20]. Meaning here is to be interpreted as an equivalent to discourse or communicative function and as such [3] note that each local grammar “is always a grammar of a discourse function”.

Local grammar is particularly adaptable for the Discourse Dynamics Approach to metaphor analysis because it focuses on the interplay between linguistic forms and their discourse functions [3]. First, unlike broader syntactic or semantic analyses, local grammar allows for a detailed examination of the patterns and structures that underpin metaphorical expressions, such as the relationship between metaphor topic (e.g., the “institutional self”) and metaphor

vehicle (e.g., “treasure” and “hero”). By identifying and comparing these patterns, it becomes possible to uncover how metaphorical framings of the economy have been adapted to address new challenges, reinforce policy shifts, or reflect broader socio-political changes. Second, the Discourse Dynamics Approach’s focus on “stretches of language” rather than isolated lexical units aligns naturally with local grammar analysis. This integration provides a powerful framework for identifying the systematic patterns and discourse functions of metaphors, offering insights into how institutions dynamically use language to construct meaning and respond to evolving contexts.

However, previous studies have largely overlooked the application of local grammar analysis to metaphor analysis. Specifically, existing studies have not incorporated key metaphor-related elements—such as metaphor vehicles, metaphor topics, and metaphor markers—into local grammar as terminologies or components for systematic analysis. This gap limits our understanding of how metaphorical constructions operate within the interplay of linguistic forms and discourse functions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

This study intends to address the following questions.

- 1) What are the general patterns of metaphor use in institutional discourse on Weibo?
- 2) How are the “institutional selves” conceptualized through metaphors in institutional discourse on Weibo?
- 3) What are the local grammar patterns of metaphorical self-representation in institutional discourse on Weibo?

3.2 Corpus

The corpus for this study was built by collecting posts from 100 governmental, corporate, press and educational official Weibo accounts. All of the accounts sent posts regularly from January 1 to September 30, 2024. A total of 1000 posts were selected by using random sampling for analysis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of the corpus

Institution	Posts N	Account example	Token	Type
Government	200	@中国政府网	14,467	5,683
Corporation	200	@华为中国	11,312	4,708
Media	200	@人民日报	19,024	7,596
University	200	@北京大学	9,507	4,267
International Organizations	200	@联合国	16,351	5,026
Total	1000		70,661	19,201

3.3 Procedure

The research consists of three stages. In *stage 1* (analyzing metaphorical self-representations in institutional discourse), the first step is to identify linguistic metaphor vehicle terms related to the institutional self from the posts. The operational definition of metaphor vehicle is: language chunks or stretches (single words or phrases) that can be justified as incongruent in the discourse but that can be made sense of by comparing and transferring between the basic and contextual meanings [17]. This study follows previous studies such as [21] to adopt the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (the 7th edition) to determine the basic meanings. To determine how far a metaphor vehicle extends, we followed [17] to “start from the most clearly incongruous or contrasting word (,) and work outwards” to include all lexical units related to the metaphorical semantic field. For instance, example (1) shows transfer of basic meaning of the most clearly incongruous word “护航 (‘escort’)” (1a) and its contextual meaning (1b). Therefore, “护航” was identified as a metaphor vehicle (in bold), while “无毒新学期 (‘a drug-free new semester’)” is labeled as the topic term (in *italics*).

护航无毒新学期

(1a) 护送船只或飞机航行。(to provide escort for vessels/aircraft)

(1b) to support and safeguard.

The second step was to categorize the metaphor vehicles into different groupings based on the semantic field of their literal senses and their discourse context [22]. This study followed the discourse dynamic approach, taking an “emergentist perspective”, which means there are no existing lists regarding vehicle groupings. Instead, the categories emerge during data analysis; as [16] suggest, “[T]he

groupings are kept tentative, loose, and temporary, and firmed up only at the last moment”. For instance, the metaphor vehicle “护航” was assigned to [TRAVEL AND MOVEMENT].

In *Stage 2* (investigating metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”), the first step is to identify and annotate the metaphor topic [17], operationalized as “aspect of the ‘institutional self’ that are described through metaphors, including the institution as a whole, member(s) of the institution, products or services provided by the institution, as well as institutional practice. Metaphor vehicles with topics related to the “institutional self” are retained for further analysis. The second step is to investigate whether there are significant differences in metaphor relatedness to the “institutional self” among five groups of institutions by performing a chi-square analysis of frequencies of metaphors related/unrelated to the “institutional self” in each group of institutional discourse. The third step is to explore different metaphor topics in metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”. A chi-square analysis is conducted to investigate whether there are differences in metaphor topics among five types of institutional discourse.

In *Stage 3* (exploring local grammar patterns of metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”), the first step is to go through the metaphorical realizations of the “institutional self” and divide the local grammar patterns into three major sets. This study categorized local grammar patterns into three sets according to the explicitness/implicitness of the metaphor topic, and the relative position of metaphor topic and vehicles. The second step is to further analyze the local grammar patterns and prototypical realizations of each pattern. Terminologies used in this present study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Terminologies for local grammar analyses of economy metaphors

Terminology	Explanation	Example
Metaphor topic	Aspect of the institutional self that are described through metaphor, includ-	#刑侦利剑守护平安#

Terminology	Explanation	Example
	ing the institution as a whole, member(s) of the institution, products or services provided by the institution, as well as institutional practice.	
Metaphor vehicle	Language stretches (single words or phrases) that are used to metaphorically describe aspects of the “institutional self”	#刑侦利剑守护平安# 她们是消防战线一道靓丽的风景线
Metaphor marker	Logical or comparative relationship between the target and source domains, often used to indicate metaphoricity.	她们是消防战线一道靓丽的风景线
Modifier	Descriptive components qualifying the source or target domain, typically adjectives or adverbs.	护航无毒新学期
Context	Background information supporting the metaphorical relationship.	年度影像旗舰

4 Results and Discussion

This section first presents analyses of general patterns of metaphor use (Section 4.1), and then patterns of metaphorical construction of institutional identity (Section 4.2). Moreover, patterns of local grammar of metaphorical construction of institutional identity are explored (Section 4.3).

4.1 Patterns of Metaphor Use in Institutional Discourse

Among the institutional discursive extracts on Weibo, 459 (45.9%) post were found to include a total of 1,177 metaphor vehicles. Generally, metaphor vehicle is frequently used in institutional discourse on Weibo. This finding may indicate that metaphor use online in relatively more flexible and creative, which may be the result of adjusting communication strategies in digital space to adapt public ways of reading and information receiving [23].

Metaphor vehicles identified from the data were further assigned to right vehicle groupings. To investigate whether there are significant differences in metaphor groupings among different types of institutional discourse, a chi-square statistic was performed. The results in Table 3 show a significant difference in metaphor use among five groups of institutions ($\chi^2 = 244.533$, $df = 28$, $p < 0.001^*$, Cramer's $V = 0.228$). Among all the metaphor groupings, [human]

and [war] metaphor varies most significantly. On the one hand, [human] metaphors are more likely to be used by corporations, universities and media, which may indicate these institutions' tendency of self-personification to decrease the distance between the readers and the institutions. For instance, the nickname “小武 *xiao3wu3* (Little Wu)” in example (2) is used by the Wuhan University for self-mentioning, personifying the institution as a person that are talking online with its followers. On the other hand, [war] metaphors are more likely to be utilized in corporate and governmental posts. For instance, “奋战 *fen4zhan4* (fight bravely)” and “一线 *yi1xian4* (the front line)” in example (3) are used by the governmental institution to emphasize the urgency and importance of the object described, i.e. the forest fire emergency.

(2)@武汉大学: 今天是#高考倒计时 100 天#...在路上全力以赴吧, 小武在“珈”等你! #我在武大等你#

@Wuhan University: Today is the 100 days countdown to the college Entrance examination #... Go all out on the road, Little Wu is waiting for you at home! #I will wait for you at Wuhan University#

(3)【致敬平凡英雄! #山火肆虐他们勇敢逆行#】近日, 贵州六盘水, 山火肆虐, 消防等多部门连续多日奋战在灭火一线。

[Salute to ordinary heroes! # Wildfires raging while they brave retrograde #] Recently, wildfires rages in Liupanshui, Guizhou. Fire control and other departments have been fighting bravely on the front line for many days.

Table 3 Cross-tabulations of metaphor groupings among five types of institutional discourse

Grouping		Institution					Total	Statistics
		Corporation	University	Media	International Organizations	Government		
[human]	Count	125	106	27	24	21	303	$\chi^2 = 244.533$, $df = 28$, $p < 0.001^*$, Cramer's $V = 0.228$
	Exp. count	94.2	55.9	54.6	51.2	47.1	303.0	
	Adj. residual	3.2	6.7	-3.7	-3.8	-3.8		
[inanimate]	Count	88	38	59	38	45	268	$p < 0.001^*$, Cramer's $V = 0.228$
	Exp. count	83.3	49.4	48.3	45.3	41.7	268.0	
	Adj. residual	.5	-1.6	1.5	-1.1	.5		
[war]	Count	16	6	40	36	44	142	

Grouping		Institution					Total	Statistics
		Corporation	University	Media	International Organizations	Government		
[travel and movement]	Exp. count	44.2	26.2	25.6	24.0	22.1	142.0	
	Adj. residual	-4.2	-3.9	2.9	2.4	4.7		
	Count	27	15	18	24	21	105	
	Exp. count	32.7	19.4	18.9	17.8	16.3	105.0	
[physical characteristics]	Adj. residual	-1.0	-1.0	-2	1.5	1.2		
	Count	29	16	13	39	7	104	
	Exp. count	32.3	19.2	18.7	17.6	16.2	104.0	
	Adj. residual	-.6	-.7	-1.3	5.1	-2.3		
[living organism]	Count	34	9	22	12	17	94	
	Exp. count	29.2	17.3	16.9	15.9	14.6	94.0	
	Adj. residual	.9	-2.0	1.2	-1.0	.6		
	Count	21	21	24	6	15	87	
[art]	Exp. count	27.1	16.0	15.7	14.7	13.5	87.0	
	Adj. residual	-1.2	1.2	2.1	-2.3	.4		
	Count	26	6	9	20	13	74	
	Exp. count	23.0	13.6	13.3	12.5	11.5	74.0	
[others]	Adj. residual	.6	-2.1	-1.2	2.1	.4		
	Count	366	217	212	199	183	1177	
	Exp. count	366.0	217.0	212.0	199.0	183.0	1177.0	

4.2 Metaphorical Construction of the “Institutional Self”

Among the metaphor vehicles identified from institutional discourse, 491 metaphor vehicles related to the “institutional self” (hereinafter abbreviated as self-related metaphors) were found. Furthermore, self-related metaphors were found to be used for describing four major aspects of the institution (or metaphor topics), including the institution as a whole, member(s) of the institution, products or services provided by the institution, as well as insti-

tutional practice. As shown in Table 4, self-related metaphors are most frequently used to describe “products or services provided by the institutions”. For instance, the basic meaning of “盛宴 *sheng4yan4* (feast)” is “a large and elaborate meal”, while its contextual meaning is “JD’ 618 Shopping Festival” (Example 6). The second most frequently metaphorically-constructed aspects of the “institutional self” is “institution as a whole”. For instance, “珈 *jia1* (‘home’)” in example (4), a homophone of “家 *jia1* (‘home’)”, has a twofold meaning, including literally referring to the Luojia Mountain nearby the Wuhan University, and metaphorically conceptualizing the university as home to students.

Table 4 Frequencies and examples of self-related metaphors across different topics

Topic	Frequency	Example
institution	195	(4) 小武在“珈”等你 (‘Little Wu is waiting for you at home’)
member(s) of the institution	23	(5) 雪山飞鹰既视感! #天门山游客拍下雪中警察像大侠# (Looks like eagles on snow mountain! # Tourists in Tianmen Mountain take photos of police officers who look like swordmen in the snow #
products or services	240	(6) 又好又便宜的京东 618, 5 月 31 日晚 8 点开启! 让我们一起开启这场购物盛宴吧! (‘Affordable and amazing deals await at JD’s 618 Shopping Festival, starting at 8 PM on May 31! Let’s kick off this shopping feast together!’)
institutional practice	81	(7) 联合国妇女署将一如既往, 携手我们的合作伙伴坚定推进妇女赋权和性别平等事业。 (‘UN Women will, as always, work hand in hand with our partners to steadfastly advance the cause of women’s empowerment and gender equality.’)
Total	539	

To further investigate whether there are differences in metaphor topics among five types of institutional discourse, a chi-square analysis is performed. The results in Table 5

show a significant difference in metaphor topic among five groups of institutions ($\chi^2=166.086$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001^*$, Cramer’s $V = 0.555$). Among all the types of institutions,

corporations are more likely to utilize metaphors to conceptualize their products and services, while not to describe the corporation as a whole, corporate member(s), and corporate practices. Universities tend to metaphorically describe the institution as a whole, with personification as a dominant way of conceptualization. Differently, media tend not to self-construct and -presentation, either metaphorically or non-metaphorically (self-mentioning). In addition, international organizations are more likely to employ metaphors to conceptualize the products and services, and practice of the institutions, rather than the institution as a whole and members of the institutions. Moreover, governmental institutions utilize metaphors to describe members, products and services, and practices, while not to conceptualize the institution as a whole.

These findings may indicate the differences in focuses and goals of communication between institutions and the audience. First, corporations' priority of promoting their products and services aligns with their goal to emphasize

tangible offerings rather than organizational identity [24]. Second, universities' focus on presenting the institution as a unified entity reflects their aim to build a sense of community and institutional ethos [11]. Third, media organizations, in contrast, appear less inclined toward self-construction or self-presentation, whether through metaphorical or explicit self-referencing. This suggests a focus on external reporting and information dissemination rather than self-promotion ([9]. Fourth, international organizations tend to use metaphors to highlight their products, services, and practices, aligning with their goal of demonstrating global impact and operational effectiveness, rather than emphasizing institutional identity or internal members [7]. Lastly, governmental institutions employ metaphors to describe members, products, services, and practices, which reflects their multifaceted roles in governance, public service, and policy implementation, while avoiding a holistic metaphorical representation of the institution itself [25].

Table 5 Cross-tabulations of metaphor topics among five types of institutional discourse

topic		institution					Total	Statistics
		corporation	university	media	international organization	government		
institution	Count	82	95	1	0	17	195	$\chi^2=166.086$, $df=12$, $p<0.001^*$, Cramer's $V=0.555$
	Exp. count	94.1	50.6	.7	17.0	32.6	195.0	
	Adj. residual	-2.2	9.1	.4	-5.4	-3.7		
member	Count	3	6	0	3	11	23	
	Exp. count	11.1	6.0	.1	2.0	3.8	23.0	
	Adj. residual	-3.5	.0	-.3	.8	4.1		
product and service	Count	146	33	1	20	40	240	
	Exp. count	115.8	62.3	.9	20.9	40.1	240.0	
	Adj. residual	5.2	-5.8	.2	-.3	.0		
practice	Count	29	6	0	24	22	81	
	Exp. count	39.1	21.0	.3	7.1	13.5	81.0	
	Adj. residual	-2.4	-4.1	-.6	7.2	2.7		
Total	Count	260	140	2	47	90	539	
	Exp. count	260.0	140.0	2.0	47.0	90.0	539.0	

4.3 Local Grammar Patterns of Metaphorical Constructions of the “Institutional Self”

This section presents local grammar analyses of metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”. As discussed in the methodological section, local grammar uses context-specific functional terms to analyze the corresponding syntactic units in instances of metaphorical constructions, which in turn allows the researcher to identify

local grammar patterns in a principled manner.

For our purpose, we adapted the terminologies used in [20], which were listed and explained in Table 2. For the sake of clarity, we divided the instances into three sets according to the similarity of local grammar patterns.

4.3.1 Local Grammar Set 1: Metaphor Vehicle with Implicit Metaphor Topic

The first set includes instances where the metaphor vehicle is presented without explicit metaphor topic, which can be implied by the readers. Explicit metaphor topics

may sometimes be present in discourse, but this happens only rarely in real talk [17]. In these cases, this study chose the local grammar analysis unit as the clause that the metaphor vehicle is located in, such as “护航无毒新学期” in example (8) and “筑牢基层火灾防控基础” in example (10). On exception is that a single local grammar unit naturally ends at and not include another metaphor vehicle that are not semantically consistent with the one that are included in this unit, such as “守护平安” in example (9).

Two prototypical patterns were found to realize the first set of metaphorical construction of the “institutional self”. The first pattern realized as “Metaphor Vehicle (verb) +

Object” is probably the most basic one in this set (Table 6). In these instances, metaphor topics are implicit but recognizable by the readers, while metaphor vehicles (usually verbs) are presented at the first position in the clause, conceptualizing institutional practices as constructional and beneficial movements, such as “护航 *hu4hang2* (‘convoy’), “守护 *shou3hu4* (‘safeguard’)” and “筑牢 *zhu4lao2* (‘build firmly’)” in examples (8) to (10), respectively. In addition, a metaphor vehicle is often followed by an object (sometimes modified), indicating the aim of certain institutional practice, such as “无毒新学期 (‘a drug-free new semester’)” in example (8).

Table 6 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realized as “Metaphor Vehicle (verb) + Object”

Metaphor Vehicle	Modifier	Object	Original Sentence
护航	无毒 新	学期	(8) 【#开学第一课# 护航无毒新学期】 (‘#The first class of the semester# escort a drug-free new semester’)
守护		平安	(9) 【新春走基层——“菜篮子”保障不打烊 守护平安不缺位】 (‘Spring Festival grassroots reporting — “Vegetable Basket” supply stays uninterrupted and safeguard security without absence’)
筑牢	基层火灾防控	基础	(10) 筑牢基层火灾防控基础 (‘Build a solid foundation for primary-level fire prevention and control’)

The second pattern is realized as “Context (+ Modifier) + Metaphor Vehicle (verb)” (Table 7). In these instances, metaphors (often verbs or noun) are frequently present at the end of the clause to highlight the institutional practice or products. In example (11), the metaphor topic is implicit in the immediate co-text, i.e. the hashtag #寒假不打烊 (‘the store doesn’t close during winter holidays’)#, but it could be inferred from the whole post that the topic is the

institution Chongqing University. In this local grammar unit, the institution is conceptualized by the metaphor vehicle “不打烊 *bu4da3yang4* (the store doesn’t close)” as a store that continuously provides information, entertainment and other services for its followers even in the winter holidays. In example (12), the metaphor vehicle “旗舰 *qi2jian4* (‘flagship’)” is used to describe a smartphone characterized by excellent performance in photographing.

Table 7 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realised as “Context (+ Modifier) + Metaphor Vehicle (verb/noun)”

Context	Modifier	Metaphor Vehicle	Original Sentence
寒假	打烊		(11) #晚安, 重大#“人的成熟, 是一个从迷茫到自知、从自知到坚定的过程。”晚安 #寒假不打烊##共赏大美校园# (#GoodNight, CQU# “Maturity is a process from confusion to self-awareness, and from self-awareness to determination.” Good night. #WinterBreakOpen24/7 #EnjoyTheBeautyOfCampus#)
年度	影像	旗舰	(12) 年度影像旗舰, 再次定义影像! (‘This year’s flagship in imaging—redefining imaging once again!’)

4.3.2 Local Grammar Set 2: Metaphor Topic Followed by Metaphor Vehicle

The second set includes instances where the metaphor topic is presented before the metaphor vehicle. In these instance, the local grammar analysis unit ranges from the metaphor topic to the metaphor vehicle, such as “刑侦利剑 (‘sharp sword of criminal investigation’)” in example

(13) and “购物盛宴 (‘feast of shopping’)” in example (14).

The first pattern in this set is realized as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Vehicle” (Table 8). In these instances, the metaphor topic is immediately followed by the metaphor vehicle (often noun), constructing strong associations between them. In example (14), the institutional practice, criminal investigation, is conceptualized as a sharp sword (‘利剑’), highlighting its capacity to swiftly and effectively uncover hidden truths. This metaphor not only emphasizes

the precision and power of criminal investigation but also evokes a sense of vigilance and authority. In example (14), an shopping activity held by the institution is described as a feast (‘盛宴’), emphasizing the variety and quality of offerings, and creating an atmosphere of festivity, aligning

the activity with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. Additionally, the use of “feast” emphasizes inclusivity and generosity, implying that there is something for everyone to enjoy, thus enhancing the appeal and attractiveness of the event.

Table 8 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realised as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Vehicle (noun)”

Metaphor Topic	Metaphor Vehicle	Original Sentence
刑侦	利剑	(13) #刑侦利剑守护平安# (‘#The sharp sword of Criminal Investigation Safeguards Peace#’)
购物	盛宴	(14) 让我们一起开启这场购物盛宴吧! (‘Let’s kick off this <i>shopping</i> feast together!’)

The second pattern in this set is realised as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Marker (+ Modifier) + Vehicle” (Table 9). Metaphor in these instances are formulated as direct metaphors (similes) with markers indicating metaphoricity [26], such as “是 *shi4* (‘is’)” and “就像 *jiu4xiang4*/好像 *hao3xiang4* (‘like’)”. Metaphor topics are often presented

at the initial position of the clause, associated with metaphor vehicles (usually noun) through metaphor markers. In example (15), members of the institution (她们 *ta1men* [‘they’]) are conceptualize as a beautiful landscape (“一道靓丽的风景线”) through a metaphor marker “是 *4* (‘is’)”.

Table 9 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realised as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Marker (+ Modifier) + Vehicle (noun)”

Metaphor Topic	Metaphor Marker	Modifier	Vehicle (noun)	Original Sentence
她们	是	消防战线	一道靓丽的风景线	(15) 她们是消防战线一道靓丽的风景线，将青春绽放在应急事业里。 (‘They are a beautiful landscape on the firefighting front line, dedicating their youth to the cause of emergency services.’)

The third pattern in this set is realised as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Vehicle (verb) + Object” (Table 10). Metaphor topics are often present in the initial position in these instances, immediately followed by metaphor vehicles (usually verb) indicating institutional practice, and an object related to the goal of institutional practice. In example (16), the pronoun “我们 *wo3men* (‘we’)” refers to the

institution, whose working goal and continuous practice of relieving hunger worldwide is conceptualized as a war in which the institution is “combating (‘抗击’)” hunger, the enemy. The metaphor highlights the urgency, intensity, and resolute commitment of the institution’s efforts to alleviate hunger globally.

Table 10 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realised as “Metaphor Topic + Metaphor Vehicle (verb) + Object”

Metaphor Topic	Vehicle (verb)	Object	Original Sentence
我们	抗击	饥饿	(16) 我们抗击饥饿，我们以实现粮食安全为使命，我们为人类的健康生活而工作。 (‘We fight hunger. We are committed to achieving food security. We work to promote healthy lives for all.’)

4.3.3 Local Grammar Set 3: Metaphor Vehicle Followed by Metaphor Topic

The third set includes instances where the metaphor vehicle is presented before the metaphor topic (Table 11). In

these instance, the local grammar analysis unit ranges from the metaphor vehicle to the metaphor topic, such as “智慧饮食 (‘smart diet’)” in example (17) and “暖心的出行体验 (‘heart-warming travel experience’)” in example (18).

Table 11 Metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” realised as “Metaphor Vehicle (+Modifier) + Metaphor Topic”

Metaphor Vehicle	Modifier	Metaphor Topic	Original Sentence
智慧		保鲜, 互联, 决策, 交互, 饮食	(17) 聚焦用户需求, 当靠近冰箱时, 冰箱会自动亮起, 以智慧保鲜、智慧互联、智慧决策、智慧交互等为用户实现买、存、吃、做全流程智慧饮食, 科技感满满 (酷) (‘Focusing on user needs, the refrigerator lights up automatically as you approach. With smart preservation, smart connectivity, smart decision-making, and smart interaction, it delivers an intelligent, end-to-end food experience—from purchasing and storage to cooking and dining. Packed with a strong sense of cutting-edge technology.’) (18) 为给旅客提供更加便捷、高效、暖心的出行体验, 中国移动江苏公司志愿者们在车站出入口处设立春运便民服务站 (‘To provide passengers with a more convenient, efficient, and heart-warming travel experience, volunteers from China Mobile Jiangsu set up Spring Festival travel service stations at station entrances and exits.’)
暖心的	出行	体验	
宝藏		高校	(19) #宝藏高校漫游计划# (‘#TreasureCampusTour#’)

The representative pattern in this set is realized as “Metaphor Vehicle (+Modifier) + Metaphor Topic”. In these instances, metaphor vehicles (often adjectives and nouns) are present before the metaphor topics to highlight the characteristics of products, services and practices of the institution. In example (17), the conventional metaphor “智慧 *zhi4hui4* (smart)” is repeated used to describe the techniques loaded in the refrigerator produced by the corporation, including “保鲜 *bao3xian1* (‘freshness retaining’), “互联 *hu4lian2* (‘interconnection’)” and “交互 *jiao1hu4* (‘interaction’)”, emphasizing the advanced, intelligent, and user-centric features of the refrigerator, and further underscores the corporation’s identity as an innovative and technology-driven institution. In example (18), the metaphor “暖心 *nuan3xin1* (‘heart-warming’)” is utilized to describe the institutional practice of providing satisfying experiences for travelers, foregrounding the emotional connection and care embedded in the institution’s services. In example (19), the noun “宝藏 *bao3zang4* (‘treasure’)” is used to describe the university, formulating positive self-evaluation from the institution.

5 Conclusion

This study explored general metaphor use in institutional posts on Weibo, and further explores local grammar patterns of metaphorical construction of the “institutional self”.

First, metaphors frequently used in institutional discourse on Weibo, nearly half of the posts were found to include a total of more than one thousand metaphor vehicles. Furthermore, metaphor groupings vary significantly among different types of institutional discourse. Second, self-related metaphors are primarily used to describe different aspects of the “institutional self”, with clear variation

across different categories of institutions. Third, varied sets of local grammar patterns of metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self” have been explored. Overall, the findings of this study indicate diverse local grammar patterns in metaphorical constructions of the “institutional self”, revealing the intricate mechanisms through which institutions construct their identity and communicate with the audience. These patterns illustrate that metaphorical expressions are not only stylistic choices but also functional tools that enable institutions to strategically position themselves in digital discourse. For instance, the flexibility of metaphorical vehicles—whether explicitly linked to topics or left for readers to infer—demonstrates institutions’ ability to tailor their communication to varying degrees of audience engagement and interpretative freedom. Furthermore, the differences in metaphor usage across institutional types highlights how metaphors are adapted to serve distinct communicative goals, such as emphasizing human connection, assertiveness, or organizational practices. Generally, these patterns emphasize the role of metaphorical creativity in constructing nuanced and context-sensitive institutional identities, reflecting the dynamic interplay between form, meaning, and audience reception.

Admittedly, this study has a few limitations. First, while the analysis identified diverse local grammar patterns in metaphorical constructions, it did not include a quantitative statistical analysis of these patterns. Second, the study did not further investigate how these local grammar patterns are employed across different types of institutional discourse to construct various aspects of the “institutional self”. Future research may build on these findings by incorporating quantitative statistical analyses of local grammar patterns to explore their prevalence and variability across institutional discourse.

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