

# A Multimodal and Pragmatic Analysis of the Environmental-Friendly Corporate Identity of Apple

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## Abstract

As environmental problems become increasingly serious, people are more aware of the importance of the environmental protection. Accordingly, companies have realized the necessity and significance of constructing an environmental-friendly identity. Environmental-friendly corporate identity is currently receiving an increasing amount of attention in the literature on corporate identity construction. The present study has continued that focus by investigating the environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple. The new product conference, which is held online by Apple in October, 2020 is chosen as the research material. The present study is different from previous research on new product conferences or corporate identities, for it offers a multimodal analysis of the data within the framework of the Relevance Theory. The purpose of the study is to explore how Apple constructed its environmental-friendly corporate identity while rationalizing its announcement in the new product conference. Findings from the study indicate that the environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple is constructed in the new product conference through the interplay of main modes, such as language, visual images, gaze and gestures. The findings of the study not only contribute to prove the feasibility of multimodal analysis of the new product conference under the Relevance Theory, but also shed light on the studies of environmental-friendly corporate identity construction.

**Keywords:** corporate identity, multimodal analysis, new product conference, pragmatic analysis, Relevance Theory

## 1. Introduction

In addition to launching new products, the new product conference has the important function of building corporate identities. In spite of the copious literatures on new product conferences in the field of linguistics, the corporate identities constructed in the new product conference has not yet received much attention. Moreover, the new product conference tends to make full use of various modes, such as language, visual images and music. The semiotic feature of the new product conference requires that a multimodal perspective should be adopted to study the corporate identity constructed in the new product conference. However, the extensively multimodal analyses of new product conferences are conducted from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics instead of Pragmatics, which has the advantage of revealing the meaning and enhancing the explanation. The Relevance Theory has been claimed to be useful in the multimodal analysis by Forceville (2014) and other researchers. Thus, this article aims at unveiling the environmental-friendly corporate identity constructed by Apple in the new product conference held in October, 2020 through a pragmatic and multimodal analysis of explicit and implicit assumptions conveyed in the conference.

The research questions that the present study tries to answer are as follows:

- 1) How did Apple construct its environmental-friendly corporate identity in the new product conference?
- 2) How did Apple rationalize its decision and make it easier for the audience to accept while constructing the environmental-friendly corporate identity?

## 2. Literature Review

This section reviews the related studies on corporate identity construction and new product conferences. The definition of identity is illustrated first, followed by an overview of the previous studies. Lastly, the achievements and limitations of previous studies are discussed.

### 2.1 Corporate Identity Construction

Researchers with different academic backgrounds give their own definitions of identity. The present study agrees with Chen (2013) who claims that identity can be constructed in communication, shaped in the context of dynamic

communication and selected purposefully and rhetorically by the communicator himself and the communicative partner. Just as individuals have identities, so do organizations (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Wagner & Pedersen, 2014). Corporate identity, as a kind of organizational identity (Halliday & Kuenzel, 2008), is attracting the attention of researchers. Although there is no consensus among researchers on the definition of corporate identity, for the complexity of constituent elements and multidisciplinary nature (Melewar, 2003; Suvatjis et al., 2012), one thing is certain that corporate identity is dynamic and multidimensional (Devereux et al., 2017; Schmeltz, 2014; Theunissen, 2014; Wu & Zhang, 2019). By referring to the definitions of corporate identity given by practitioner-based group and academic-based group, the corporate identity in the present research is regarded as an effective strategic instrument to achieve competitive advantage and an expression of characteristics of a corporation.

According to Melewar (2003), corporate identity has the advantages of motivating its employees, showing its business capabilities to its stakeholders as well as product and service diversity to its customers, attracting investors, etc. In this case, the construction of corporate identity not only directly relates to the social evaluation of the enterprise, the access to resources, but also affects the identification of its staff with the enterprise (Wu & Zhang, 2019). Hence, the construction of corporate identity is of great significance to the corporate itself.

However, the overwhelming majority of research focused individual identity construction, and only a few attempts were made on collective identity construction with great social influence, such as corporate identity. Tekmil and Oktay (2018) studied corporate identity of Besiktas Gymnastics Club by analyzing academic articles, newspaper archives, books and websites. Wu and Zhang (2019) took corporate annual reports as data to figure out discursive strategies for the construction of Chinese and American Corporate Identities. Nevertheless, all the studies are limited to unilateral static discourse strategies of corporate identity construction (Lv & Zhan 2020). To make up for the lack of studies on interactive conversations in corporate identity construction, Lv and Zhan (2020) extracted interactive conversations in DIDI Hitch-hike Crisis on Sina Microblog to study the online corporate identity construction. Although their study made a contribution to the research on corporate identity construction, it still restricted itself to the textual level without taking account of the multimodal nature of computer-mediated communication language. What's more, Wu (2020) claimed the previous research on corporate identity construction could be divided into five perspectives, and one of them is the multimodal perspective focusing on semiotics (Gatti, 2016). Xiong (2020) suggested that future research could adopt new research methods such as multimodal to study corporate identity construction. Thus, the analysis of new media business discourse from the multimodal perspective will become an important topic in business communication and discourse research (Xu & Feng, 2020).

## 2.2 *New Product Conferences*

As an essential part of new media business communication, the new product conference is not only an effective means to inform audiences of new products and persuade them to buy these new products, but also a vital channel to project and construct the corporate identity. However, instead of focusing on the corporate identity, researchers prefer to take the promotion of new products or the presentation skills as their research focus.

As for the objects of extensive studies of corporate identity, they are corporate websites (Tekmil & Oktay, 2018), corporate annual reports (Wu & Zhang, 2019), corporate responsibility report (Pérez & Del Bosque, 2012; Bravo et al., 2012), and conversations on social networking sites, such as Twitter (Li & Doreen, 2018) and Sina Microblog (Lv & Zhan 2020). The new product conference has not received the attention of researchers in terms of the corporate identity construction.

In addition, multimodal analyses on new product conferences were mostly conducted on the basis of Systemic Functional Linguistics rather than Pragmatics. Chen and Qian (2011) believed that the introduction of multimodal analysis into pragmatic analysis would be conducive to revealing the meaning and enhancing the explanatory power. Moreover, Forceville (2014) argued that Relevance Theory as a model is useful for the multimodal analysis. Indeed, some attempts have been made to account for the combination of Relevance Theory and multimodal analysis. For instance, Guan (2011) has adopted Relevance Theory to interpret multimodal discourse. Desilla (2012) and Sun (2013) conducted a multimodal analysis of films based on Relevance Theory. Song (2014) and Tian (2013) have done research on teaching from multimodal perspective under the guidance of Relevance Theory. Sasamoto, Ohagan, and Doherty (2016) have carried out a multimodal analysis of Japanese TV programs within the framework of Relevance Theory. Del Saz-Rubio (2018) has investigated ads through a pragmatic and multimodal analysis of implied meanings on the basis of Relevance Theory.

To sum up, the construction of corporate identity is essential, but related studies have overlooked the new product conference, which is an important channel to construct the corporate identity. Meanwhile, previous studies rarely analyze the new product conference from a multimodal perspective under a theory of pragmatics and Relevance Theory is thought to be useful for the multimodal analysis. To fill this research gap, the corporate identity in the new product

conference can be studied from the multimodal perspective under the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This section introduces the theory used to analyze the selected data as well as the transcription method chosen to transcribe the data.

#### *3.1 Relevance Theory*

When it comes to introducing Relevance Theory to the multimodal analysis, the distinct problem is that Relevance Theory is first and foremost conceived as a theory of verbal communication (Desilla, 2012). It is not originally designed to account for the multimodal analysis of new product conferences. However, Forceville (2014) argued that Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) could deal with all forms of communication addressed to more than one individual if it is adapted and extended. In his opinion, the reason why Relevance Theory needs to be revisited is that discourses using Relevance Theory deviate from the prototypical form of oral verbal communication in Sperber and Wilson's model.

The revisited Relevance Theory by Forceville (2014) demonstrates that ostensive communication aims at attracting the audience's attention, informative intention refers to convey information and/or attitudes and communicative intention is about the related effect on this audience at no unnecessary effort. In short, there is a presumption of relevance among messages.

Besides, he suggests that elements in the picture should be depicted first, then views can derive more information with reference to the relevant knowledge in their cognitive environment. After that, explicature is able to be revealed through reference assignment, disambiguation, and enrichment. Finally, implicature can be inferred and further pragmatic inferences can be fed by hypotheses coming from the previous information, viewer's knowledge, and their understanding.

Moreover, he points out that any attention-grabbing device is the signal of its intention to engage in ostensive-inferential communication. At present, Forceville (2014) is mainly concentrated on the multimodal analysis of static pictures. However, just as the original Relevance Theory, which is initially developed for verbal communication, can be applied to other modalities or semiotic discourses, it is reasonable to extend the revisited Relevance Theory to dynamic multimodal analysis.

Therefore, the present research not only agrees with the view of Forceville (2014) that the Relevance Theory he fleshed out is useful for multimodal communication, but also adopts the revisited Relevance Theory to study the new product conference so as to provide further evidence for it.

#### *3.2 Multimodal Transcription*

New product conferences are multimodal as they contain various modalities; meanings created in the new product conference thus arises neither from visual image alone, nor from verbal language alone, but rather from the interplay of different semiotic resources. This multimodal nature of new product conferences results in that the mere transcription of verbal language, as a means of data presentation, would not yield enough insights into the overall investigation. To thoroughly understand the explicatures and implicatures in new product conferences, systematical analysis of the contribution of modes is required. Thus, the multimodal transcription proposed by Baldry and Thibault (2006) is adapted for the present research to identify the contribution of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources that create the overall meaning of the environmental-friendly corporate identity constructed in the new product conference.

### **4. Method**

This section offers a description of the qualitative method for the study of corporate identity in the present paper. Prior to a stage-by-stage presentation of the data analysis, the rationale underlying the choice of data is discussed.

#### *4.1 Data Collection*

The data used is collected from the new product conference held by Apple in October 2020. Since 2013, Apple has ranked first in the Global Best Brands. The Global Best Brands is the annual ranking of the World's Most Valuable Brands conducted by Interbrand, the world's leading brand consultancy for more than 40 years. The financial performance of the branded products or services, the role of brand in the purchase decision process and the strength of the brand are the determinants in ranking. In other words, Apple has won the first place in the above three aspects for eight years. More concretely, its products and services enjoy the best financial performance, its brand plays a vital role in the purchase decision process, and its brand has the unmatched strength.

What's more, every new product conference on new iPhone is on the list of the Most Memorable New Product Launch Survey since 2013. The Most Memorable New Product Launch survey is developed by integrated marketing firm

Schneider Associates and its research partner Sentient Decision Science aiming to reveal the new products each year that consumers remembered most. According to the Most Memorable New Product Launch 2017 Survey, Apple products not only topped the list, but also achieved this feat nearly every time they were released.

Additionally, in the new product conference held in October, 2020, Apple announced that headphones and chargers would be removed from iPhone boxes on grounds of environmental protection. Previously, headphones and chargers were given away to phone buyers for free. Thus, as soon as the news was released, it caused a heated debate.

Taking all into account, the data used in the analysis are video clips that contribute to the construction of the environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple. Those video clips are selected from the new product conference held by Apple in October 2020. In this case, the significance of the study is ensured. In addition, to ensure the accuracy of data, the selected new product conference video is directly downloaded from YouTube, where Apple's official YouTube account uploads their new product conferences videos.

#### 4.2 Data Transcription

After downloading the new product conference video held by Apple in October 2020, the present study selects the segments of the video that best answer the research questions and transcribes them for further analysis. Since the descriptive analysis carried out here is of a multimodal nature as it aims at capturing how the different modes contribute to the creation of meaning, the multimodal transcription proposed by Baldry and Thibault (2006) is adapted for the multimodal transcription of the new product conference. This multimodal transcription is complemented by a qualitative analysis of explicatures and implicatures in the light of the Relevance Theory revisited by Forceville (2014).

In particular, the present study first makes a multimodal transcription table and then segments the selected video clips of the new product conference into frames. A still snapshot of one in a series of vertically aligned frames is displayed in each row of the multimodal transcription table (Desilla, 2012). Each row, except for the visual frame, is divided into six columns to code and analyze other modalities interacting with the related visual frames. Starting from the left to the right, the number of frames in each row of the transcription table is put in the column 1. The lead-in time of the selected visual frame shown in the column 3 is placed in the column 2. Column 4 describes the selected visual image in terms of camera position (CP), visual focus or gaze of participants (VF), and distance (D). According to Baldry and Thibault (2006), camera position can be divided into stationary and moving, and the later can be further divided into sagittal or tilting, sideways composed of panning and dolly, and perpendicular consisting of forwards and backwards. There are eight types of distance: MAXIMALLY CLOSE; VCS = Very close shot (less than head and shoulders); CS = Close shot (head and shoulders); MCS = Medium close shot (human figure cut off at waist); MLS = Medium long shot (full length of human figure); LS = Long shot (human figure occupies approximately half the height of the image); VLS = Very long shot (the distance is even greater); MAXIMALLY DISTANT. Kinesic action, which contains locomotory, facial or gestural movements, is designated in column 5 with square brackets designating simultaneous movements and round brackets designating sequential movements. Soundtrack, such as Figure, Ground and Field, are in column 6. Figure refers to the most important sound, Ground the next and Field the least. The general soundscape of the listener is constructed by Field. Besides, to distinguish between speech, music and other sounds, a more simplified set of soundtrack notational conventions revisited by Desilla (2012) based on the notational conventions developed by Baldry and Thibault (2006) is adopted in the present study: [♫] = instrumental music, [nar.] = narration appearing in italics, [\*] = accented syllables, [#] = pauses. Besides, the degrees of loudness can be classified into five types: [pp = very soft, p = soft, n = normal, f = loud, and ff = very loud]. Tempo can be marked as S, M or F: [S = slow, M = medium, F = fast].

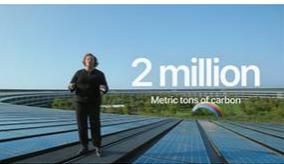
## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Environmental-Friendly Corporate Identity

This part offers a description of how Apple used various modes to construct its environmental-friendly corporate identity in the new product conference while rationalizing its decision of removing chargers and headphones from its iPhone boxes. The present study first transcribes the selected video clips that contributes to the construction of environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple and then gives a pragmatic analysis of the data.

Table 1. Multimodal Transcription

Frame no.	Time (hh: mm: ss)	Frame	Visual Image	Kinesic Action	Soundtrack
1	00:38:39		CP: panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>Our offices, stores and data centers run on 100% # renewable energy ...</i> n, M
2	00:38:51		CP: panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>...net (*) zero (*) climate impact across our entire business...</i> n, M
3	00:39:20		CP: stationary D: MLS	The video is playing	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>...past progress, removing harmful chemicals and using renewable and recyclable materials.</i> n, M
4	00:39:26		CP: stationary D: MLS	The video is playing	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>And now (*) for the first time, we're using 100% recycled, rare earth elements...</i> n, M
5	00:39:37		CP: panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>...We've also been transitioning our iPhone manufacturing partners to renewable (*) energy...</i> n, M
6	00:39:48		CP: forwards D: MCS		FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>...Customers already have over 700 million (*) lightning headphones.</i> n, M
7	00:40:01		CP: panning D: MCS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: <i>... over 2 billion (*) Apple power adapters out in the world...</i> n, M

8	00:40:09		CP: backwards and panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: ... So, we are removing these items from the iPhone box... n, M
9	00:40:36		CP: panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: ...cut over 2 million (*) metric tons of carbon emissions annually. n, M
10	00:40:42		CP: panning D: MLS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: ...450,000 (*) cars from the road per (*) year. n, M
11	00:40:49		CP: forwards and panning D: MCS VF: Lisa looks at the camera	[Lisa speaks with gestural movements]	FIELD ♪ FIGURE Lisa nar.: ...we're really proud that Apple is taking the lead. We hope others will follow... n, M

Frame 1 and Frame 2 in Table 1 show that a woman standing on the roof of the Apple Park looked at the camera. Written words were put on her left with large font for the year and small font for the keywords. There was a pause after 100% when she said that their offices, stores and data centers run on 100% renewable energy with gestural movements as shown in Frame 1. Frame 2 shows that words net and zero were stressed as she introduced that Apple plant to have net zero climate impact across its entire business by 2030. In the meanwhile, soft music was playing.

Audiences with the relevant knowledge about Apple in their cognitive environment can derive the information that the woman is Lisa, Apple's Vice Present of Environment, Policy and Social Initiative. Where she stood was equipped with photovoltaic panels. From what Lisa said and the visual images, it can be found that Frame 1 is about the achievements that Apple has made in 2020 and Frame 2 is about the goals that it strives to achieve in ten years with regard to environmental protection. As for the photovoltaic panels and the trees behind Lisa, they can be regarded as a hint that Apple has taken measures to protect the environment, like using renewable energy and planting trees. All of those leads to the implicature that Apple is committed to environmental protection.

Frame 3 and Frame 4 demonstrates that iPhone was taken as an example by Lisa to account for how Apple took the environmental protection into consideration when it developed its products. According to Lisa, Apple has made progress in environmental protection by removing harmful chemicals and using renewable and recyclable materials. In 2020, it went a step further by using 100% recycled, rare earth elements in all magnets. Those information are displayed clearly and succinctly in the visual images in Frame 3 and 4, which even contains more details than verbal language. Besides, the soft music was still playing.

Frame 6 displays that the visual image of headphones appeared when Lisa pointed out customers had over 700 million lightening headphones accompanied by gestures and an emphasis on the number. Just as written language in Frame 1 and Frame 2, written language in Frame 7, Frame 9 and Frame 10 were also put on the left of Lisa with large font for the number and small font for the keywords. Lisa stressed each number she mentioned with gestures. The interplay of those modes leads to the explicature that if chargers and headphones are removed from the iPhone box, the amount of carbon dioxide emissions will be greatly reduced, otherwise a large number of resources will be wasted.

In fact, those mentioned frames are used to rationalize the decision declared by Lisa as shown in Frame 8 that Apple power adapters and headphones were to be removed from the iPhone box. In addition, what Lisa said in Frame 5 and Frame 11 indicates that Apple not only devoted itself to environmental protection, but also tried to influence its partners and other companies to save energy and use renewable energy so as to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

What should be noticed is that when Lisa appeared in front of the camera, she was always looking directly at the camera. It is hypothesized that she tried to express her sincerity to the audience by imitating the way of communication. Besides, the soft music played all the time as Lisa spoke, which could be regard as an attempt to calm the audiences.

Therefore, the environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple is constructed in the new product conference. Meanwhile, its decision of removing items from the iPhone box is rationalized in the name of environmental protection, which may make it easier for the audiences to accept the decision.

### *5.2 Interplay of the Main Modes*

From the above analyses of each frame, we can find that the language, visual images, gaze and gestures are the major modes used in the product conference to construct the environmental-friendly corporate identities of Apple. Among them, language plays the most important role in the formation of meanings and the construction of the environmental-friendly corporate identity. More specifically, language can be further divided into spoken language and written language. The former is spoken by the speakers functioning as the major resource of the meaning, while the latter is mainly used in visual images to highlight the keywords of the speech, capture the attention of audiences and emphasize the number.

Compared with language, visual images play a relatively auxiliary part in the formation of meanings and the construction of corporate identities. With reference to the previous analyses, it is manifest that the major function of visual images is to show the audience the speakers, the information mentioned and the products introduced. As for gestures, they are mainly used by speakers to express their feelings. Besides, the speakers in visual images are looking at the camera when they speaking. It is said that this behavior makes audiences feel that speakers are communicating with them. In addition, soft music is used as an attempt to calm the audience.

## **6. Discussion**

The present study aims at investigating the environmental-friendly corporate identity of Apple constructed in the new product conference held in October, 2020 and exploring the way in which Apple rationalize its decision. The new product conference is chosen as the research material, for it can build the corporate identity at the same time as announcing new information. Relevance Theory is employed as the theoretical framework in the research, which enlarges the applicable scope of Relevance Theory and distinguishes the present study from previous studies. Compared with previous studies, the study contributes to the research on corporate identity construction in that it adopts a multimodal analysis instead of limiting itself to language. Findings of the research indicate that company can rationalize its decisions in the name of environmental protection and utilize various modes to realize its purpose.

## **7. Conclusion**

This section first summarizes the key findings of the research, followed by presenting the contributions and limitations of the research. Besides, the suggestions for further study are offered subsequently.

The primary objective of the study was to figure out how Apple constructed its environmental-friendly corporate identity in the new product conference while announcing its decision. The secondary purpose of the study was to investigate how Apple rationalized its decision and make it easier for the audience to accept. In order to achieve those objectives, the study carried out the research on the basis of the revisited Relevance Theory. Data was collected by means of downloading the video in YouTube, which was uploaded by Apple's official YouTube account. The multimodal transcription proposed by Baldry and Thibault (2006) was adapted to transcribe the video. Findings of the study is an attempt to prove the feasibility of multimodal analysis of the new product conference based on the Relevance Theory. It contributes to illustrate the effectiveness of new product conference in the construction of corporate identity. Practically, findings of the research may shed light on companies that intend to construct the environmental-friendly corporate identity.

Despite the above contributions, the present study still has limitations. For example, it focuses on the speakers and written words in the visual images ignoring the color, composition and other less evident factors. It is hoped that more researchers will conduct the multimodal analysis of the new product conference from the pragmatic perspective in the future.

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